

# The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in  
one-to-one teaching of writing

Volume 16, Number 8

April, 1992

## ....from the editor....

Time flies—and technology advances. In honor of the *Writing Lab Newsletter's* 15th anniversary this month, we've reprinted (on page 11) the first issue, all two pages of it (plus a mailing list). Done at the kitchen table, on a long-since-deceased Sears typewriter, that issue reflected both my knowledge of newsletter production (scissors, cellophane tape, and ruler) and the interest of writing lab directors in sharing and in staying in touch.

Many of the charter members are still part of our group, and on page 10 of this month's issue is an article by one of them, Mary Croft. Hundreds of new voices have been added (or come and gone) since our beginnings, and the technology which processes the words, formats the pages, and prints the copies is different. But as the articles in this issue indicate, our interest in sharing our experience and insights remains constant..... The more things change, the more they stay the same.

•Muriel Harris, editor

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## **Empowering Writing Center Staff: Martyrs or Models?**

As writing center staff, we are exquisitely sensitive to the psychological factors that influence our students' performance. Like most writing center instructors and tutors, we carefully develop writers' confidence, recognizing that students who expect failure often experience precisely that, and not necessarily because they are incapable of success. However, like physicians who cannot heal their own ills, we often fail to cultivate within ourselves and within our programs the confidence and positive self-esteem that we so carefully groom in our students. We speak of the importance of writing centers and of our satisfying involvement in this growing English discipline, but we frequently fail to convince ourselves of our worth, thus succumbing to the negative images that exist in many universities and English departments and sharply limiting our own effectiveness.

We need not look far to find sources of our disabling malady. As the recent Confer-

ence on College Composition and Communication "Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing" notes, faculty committed to quality writing instruction frequently are members of "an enormous academic underclass," their contributions "misunderstood or undervalued" (329-330). And if composition instructors often are ranked low in the academic hierarchy, writing center personnel often are denied even a shaky foothold on the ladder. Commenting on "The Coming of Age of Writing Centers," Muriel Harris notes that, despite the rapid growth of the writing centers nationwide, their status remains precarious: they are "sneered at as 'comma fixing stations,' " sniffed at "with condescension" and "thought of as not much more than 'some extra help down the hall' " (3-4).

Writing out of a frustration generated by these limiting, negative self-images, Stephen North reports similar erroneous views of the writing center's role—"some sort of skills center, a fix-it shop"—and deplores the misconceptions of colleagues who believe "a writing center is to illiteracy what a cross between Lourdes and a hospice would be to serious illness: one goes there hoping for miracles, but ready to face the inevitable" (435). He also cites Hairston's disparaging dismissal of writing labs: "they're still only giving first aid and treating symptoms. They have not solved the problem" (436). Gary Olson, too, details the problem of contagious, unproductive attitudes coming first from faculty and then infecting writing center tutors and students (155). No wonder members of the writing center's professional staff are infected as well!

Harris, North and Olson all recommend promising cures for this attitudinal malady. Staying within a relatively conservative tradition, Olson suggests that we carefully train tutors in the art of positive reinforcement in order to win students' trust and that we encourage instructors to make referrals in a more sensitive and diplomatic manner (161, 196). While these are valid suggestions for addressing problems involving students' self-esteem, Olson's ideas may not work effectively for entire programs and staffs until more radical and far-reaching changes in the perception of the writing center's role are achieved. Both Harris and North mention innovative ways of broadening the center's mission. Harris cites flexibility as an important strength of the writing center—a creative adaptability that keeps its services in

tune with a particular institution's changing needs—and she endorses the center's role in training graduate assistants and in supporting the writing-across-the-curriculum movement (5,7). After emphatically redefining the role of the writing center and asserting that its staff is not "here to serve" but "to talk to writers" (440), North endorses these same two programs as part of an expanding institutional role now being filled by growing centers which are also establishing resource libraries and publications, sponsoring readings and workshops, and reaching out into the high schools and wider community (445).

We believe that the kinds of flexibility and growth supported by Harris and North are critical in generating the respect writing centers need if their work is to succeed. Therefore, we would like to explore several issues involved in developing staff confidence and then describe two programs that we have used in our own writing centers to generate respect and thus empower both ourselves and our staffs.

We believe that the central issue in developing confidence is in doing work that is valued, both internally and externally. In most writing centers, basic internal valuing exists: both directors and staff believe that they are doing a good job with important work. In fact, many of them believe this so fervently that they

The **Writing Lab Newsletter**, published in ten monthly issues from September to June by the Department of English, Purdue University, is a publication of the National Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement. ISSN 1040-3779

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**Donations:** The newsletter is an informal publication with no billing procedures. Yearly donations of \$15.00 (U.S.\$20.00 in Canada) are requested to cover costs of duplicating and mailing. Please make all checks payable to Purdue University and send to the editor. Prepayment is requested from business offices.

**Manuscripts:** Recommended length for articles is eight to twelve double-spaced typed pages, three to four pages for reviews, and one to two pages for the Tutors' Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. Please enclose self-addressed envelopes with return postage clipped (not pasted) to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 45 days prior to the month of issue (e.g., Aug. 15 for the Oct. issue).

Please send all articles, reviews, announcements, comments, queries, and yearly donations to the editor.

trumpet the "we work harder under worse conditions than anyone else" line whenever they can impose upon someone else's ear. And, here is the rub: they are soliciting something they are unlikely ever to get; they are asking the rest of the university to laud them, to value them, for solving basic writing problems, which most faculty wish didn't exist and certainly do not want to invest in personally. Of course, writing center staffs often do not get the desired approval—the external valuing—for these contributions, and slowly the external skepticism begins to chip away at their confidence, often causing them to develop a martyr pose. Unfortunately, martyrs just aren't popular, and the discouraging cycle continues. But it can be broken by developing specialized programs of the kinds recommended by Harris and North.

At this juncture, let us note that we do not advocate jettisoning our centers' commitments to beginning writers. In fact, in the universities where we teach, traditional writing center programs are important, and both of us have made long-term instructional and administrative commitments to them. We continue to be active in recruiting, training, and supervising tutors who work with writers at all levels, including large numbers of basic writers. We also continue to foster a student-centered, process-based approach among our staff. However, we advocate building our center's reputations on something more than traditional peer tutoring strategies—on activities our university communities already value: in one institution, a computer-assisted writing program; in the other, a writing-across-the-curriculum program.

In the first of these settings, the computer-assisted writing program was conceived five years ago when the tutorial coordinator was assisting a foreign student with her dissertation in the university's educational technology lab. This was about the time that many composition conference presenters were beginning to discuss the value of word processing and other computer applications for composition students, especially basic writers. We became intrigued with the possibilities of computer-based learning for our students. However, we had a problem: we had no computers.

But that obstacle did not mar our enthusiasm for the new technology. We negotiated a shared-access agreement with the Department of Educational Technology, whose

chair welcomed our participation because he wanted to increase computer use, thus justifying the expansion of his lab. The instructional conditions were far from ideal—two different types of computers and simplistic software—but it was a start. Thus, in our first year, we taught composition on borrowed computers, bringing tutors into the computer classroom and encouraging the kind of individualized and small group activities that are typical of a writing center.

That same year we also gained access to and instruction in the use of the university's mainframe authoring program. With our tutors and students from the English Education program, we began creating a grammar tutorial that incorporated our tutors' questioning styles into a CAI program. This tutorial soon became one of the most heavily used CAI programs on campus, and its success, along with the reputation of our word processing instruction, won us considerable respect from the English faculty, the College of Education administrators, and the university's computer center. Soon, with surprising ease, we won accreditation for a new educational technology class, Computer Applications for Composition, which became a co-requisite for our basic writing classes and allowed us to extend our emphasis on collaborative learning and writing.

As we became known as computer specialists, our image as writing center staff began to change. Previously, when we tutored writing students, some faculty believed we were doing work that was alien and even degrading—below college level, something necessary but distasteful. When we began teaching with computers, we still were involved in strange and alien affairs; however, many of our colleagues perceived our computer work as being beyond, not below, their levels of expertise. While they still wondered why college writers should need tutoring, even the most reluctant faculty saw computers as the inevitable and even desirable wave of the future.

But more importantly, because writing center staff had led the way in this somewhat intimidating new field, the other activities that we had long pursued seemed to gain stature and respect through association. If our staff had the intelligence and imagination to understand computers and to use them in our teaching, then it seemed probable that similar intelligence and imagination informed the other aspects of our work as well. People began to

view our conferencing techniques, our peer critique groups, and our collaborative learning projects with new interest and appreciation.

In addition, we started doing ambitious and valued research with the educational technology faculty, and we started writing grants to obtain improved hardware and software. We experienced numerous rejections of our proposals, but we were determined to get our writing students a state-of-the-art-computerized writing lab, the first and only such facility on our campus. After six proposal submissions, we finally won a matching grant from Apple, a grant that allowed us to integrate the Macintosh computer fully into our teaching and to involve our tutors actively in our computer-based composition program. This program is now a reality, and the lab has expanded to include English faculty teaching upper-division writing classes.

Largely because of our staff's success in obtaining funding for this computerized writing lab, our writing center's physical layout changed dramatically. We moved from a dumpy duplex several blocks from the English department into the heart of the library, which also houses most of the Arts and Sciences faculty and classes. This simple change in visibility and accessibility has vastly improved our program's image and credibility. Students and faculty who had intended to come to the writing center just to use the computers gained a new view of tutoring. Open to observation, it was quickly perceived as the honest questioning, coaching, and teaching it had always been, not the subversive activity some had suspected. Also, faculty soon realized that tutees were not some undesirable underclass of students; indeed, they were the very students who sat in the faculty members' own classes.

Now, the students and faculty using our center represent an even greater cross-section of the university population. When not scheduled for basic writing classes or advanced writing classes from diverse arts and sciences areas, the center is used by honor students, newspaper and literary magazine writers, thesis and proposal writers, soon-to-graduate resume writers—and basic writers. We draw a few graphic artists, music students, and computer hackers, but we always grant priority to students writing for academic purposes. Time for faculty interaction is still too limited—it often means simply passing along a helpful

article, computer file, or textbook—but the lively, curious, collegial spirit of the writing center staff has won us respect, not just for our computer-based instruction but also for the larger basic writing and tutoring program. Interestingly enough, our writing-center approach to teaching in the lab has caught on with other faculty who are now requesting writing tutors to assist in their classes and who are themselves becoming more like coaches than critics. And now when writing center staff are introduced at all-university meetings, instead of mumbling their center's name, expecting disinterest or scorn, they speak with confidence, knowing they are viewed as colleagues, not interlopers.

Another approach that can build both internal confidence for staff and external valuing for the writing center is that of writing across the curriculum, an emphasis specifically recommended by Harris and North. On the second campus, the writing center is not only a place where students work on their writing but also a place where faculty from all departments go for consultation on using writing in their own non-English classes. Thus, while many students first use the writing center in conjunction with their basic writing courses, an equal and growing number first use it in conjunction with a non-English department course, often one that is part of the center's writing-across-the-curriculum program.

In this second writing center, the staff includes a director, half of whose time is committed to English department instruction; two other English faculty, who have one-fourth of their time assigned to writing-across-the-curriculum projects; and the usual complement of writing tutors, many of them graduate students in composition, all of them trained in a course designed to teach peer tutoring strategies for composition. Each quarter, the writing center faculty work with several non-English department faculty, helping them incorporate writing as a mode of learning into their courses. We create these liaisons through friendship, referral, or faculty request, but they never are mandated by deans or department chairs.

Usually these collaborations involve several preliminary meetings in which we discuss our colleagues' goals for using writing. Careful listening and discussion are critical, for this kind of collaboration is not license to set

up our soapboxes to advance our own writing agenda (those things we could not get students to learn in our own classes). Once we understand our collaborators' perceptions of writing in philosophy, theater, or biology, we then begin to plan writing projects together. Because our colleagues usually have even less time than we for paper reading, we often select a combination of journals, collaborative writing, and short papers as class projects. In a theater class, for example, the instructor elected to replace her traditional term paper, which she said both she and her students dreaded, with a question-based journal and two short papers based on those journals.

In some cases, after planning the writing projects, discussing strategies for presenting and evaluating the projects, and offering the instructor and students writing center support with the actual writing process, the collaboration ends. More frequently, however, it continues. In a philosophy course, for instance, after designing an initial journal and collaborative paper project, the writing center consultant elected to attend a number of class sessions, functioning as co-instructor while students began learning to think and write philosophically. In addition, twice during the quarter, the consultant brought a team of writing tutors to class to work with small groups of students. Then these tutors worked with students individually in the writing center as their papers evolved.

Clearly, such intensive involvement is time-consuming, but the dividends are impressive. From this initial quarter's work, for example, grew a simplified collaboration in the same course the following quarter, a continuing collaboration with a second philosophy instructor who took over the course the following year, and a third collaboration with the first instructor who was teaching a different course; a jointly-authored paper describing this work for a philosophy journal is in process. In addition, we have introduced several faculty and several hundred students to a rather different view of writing to learn as well as to a new view of writing tutors—peers with whom they can work throughout the writing process, not just at the last minute for comma control, if at all. Furthermore, instructors, tutors, and students discovered striking similarities in the writing and thinking processes common to philosophy and English, a discovery that is critical as universities try to integrate rather than isolate

discourse communities.

This cooperation with our writing center and the philosophy department is typical of other projects across the disciplines. In such endeavors, we have no occasion to complain that we work harder than anyone else under more adverse conditions. We are working with those "anyone else's," and we're all working hard more successfully; we share the conditions, and they are exciting. As always, we continue to use the flexible, process-based, student-centered strategies that make the writing center approach unique. This combination of old and new strategies bolsters our reputation across campus both as individual staff members and as an important university resource.

In centers such as the two described here, not only do our colleagues in other disciplines see us as models rather than martyrs, administrators see our writing-across-the-curriculum projects and computer-based composition instruction as reasons for adding to our funding base. Thus, the externally-valued programs sponsored by these two writing centers have led to our continued growth while at the same time earning us strong support from students, faculty, and administrators. Finally, these two programs have fostered the development of internal staff confidence, for in demonstrating our worth to others on grounds they are willing to honor, we have also nurtured within ourselves—collectively and individually—the same healthy and positive attitudes we so carefully groom in our students.

While our particular programs may not be appropriate for every writing center, every institution, like every writing student, has individualized needs. Writing centers that apply their traditionally flexible and responsive strategies not just to individual students but to their own institutions as a whole can enrich their staffs and their schools by developing innovative programs well suited to their own settings. Providing staff members with new options and stimulating contacts, such programs provide the challenges and risks that keep individuals growing and vibrant—and that make staff members feel good about themselves and their accomplishments. Thus the writing center and its staff remains truly central, actively engaged in what North has called a "polished and highly visible...dialogue about

defined. In short, the Director of Writing Outcomes is a partner with us, whose efforts at educating the faculty have contributed greatly to the Center's success.

### **A Writing Proficiency Requirement**

Cooperation from the faculty goes far to explain the steady increase in the number of students signing up for conferences in the Center. But another factor is the junior-level Writing Proficiency Exam, required for graduation. It's not as bad as it sounds. Students may elect to satisfy the requirement in other ways besides taking the two-hour exam: by submitting a portfolio of writing assignments completed during one semester, for instance. In any case, the graduation requirement tells students (and faculty) that their university is serious about writing. And it generates more business for the Center, as students attend seminars on taking the exam, or work individually with a tutor to prepare, or assemble a portfolio under a tutor's supervision. If this is "teaching to the test," then so be it. If this is "remediation," so much the better. In most cases, students who fail on the first attempt will pass the next time if they have sought help in the Center. Attending conferences in the Writing Center is one avenue among several toward achieving a satisfactory measure of writing competence and thereby fulfilling the requirement. The Coordinator of Writing Assessment stresses this point in the materials she distributes to students and when she speaks with them in person.

### **The Key: A Division of Labor, or All for One**

The Coordinator of Writing Assessment, with the Director of Writing Outcomes and myself, Director of the Writing Center, work together, each promoting the others' efforts as we contribute to the success of the entire, university-wide emphasis on writing. Teamwork is the key. (It's no accident that we have our offices in the Center, only a couple of doors from one another.) I focus on running the Center, training and supervising TA's. The Coordinator of Writing Assessment develops "instruments," supervises testing and scoring, conducts research, and keeps meticulous records. The Director of Writing Outcomes continues to educate the faculty across campus in the use of writing as a way of learning, and in general supports our efforts and acts as liaison to the deans and the provost. The

Writing Associates work with us all, as their title suggests.

I cannot ignore the factor of individuals' talent and energy, of course. But I believe that our set-up itself would succeed equally well at other universities our size in promoting, among other worthy causes, a writing center, while avoiding the dangers inherent in "empowerment."

Jake Gaskins  
Southeast Missouri State  
University  
Cape Girardeau, MO

## **Call for Proposals**

### **Midwest College Learning Center Association Conference**

**October 14-16, 1992  
Davenport, Iowa**

#### ***"Discovering New Directions: Connecting Theory and Practice"***

Deadline for proposals: May 1, 1992. For information and proposal guidelines, contact Dr. Karen Quinn, Academic Skills Program, Counseling Center (333), University of Illinois at Chicago, Box 4348, Chicago, IL 60680 (312-413-2184).

## **Call for Papers**

Essays on humorous incidents related to writing labs and tutoring are being solicited for a collection for possible publication. The collection will explore the humorous side of writing labs: incidents between tutors, students, and/or faculty. Essays should be humorous without being derogatory or over-exaggerated. Manuscripts should be 500-1500 words, typed, double-spaced, and will not be returned. Deadline: August 1, 1992. Send to R. J. Lee, English Department, 1356 Heavilon, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907-1356.

## Tutors' Column

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I had been tutoring for less than two weeks when Kah, a foreign student, came to the Writing Center. Although I was new to the job, I could see that his problems were almost completely different from those of my other tutees. His grasp of the English language was, at best, shaky; he could not explain any of the conclusions he came to in his essays; he could not define, only categorize; and he relied upon catchwords instead of his own insight.

Kah's difficulties stemmed from the fact that he was raised in another culture which gave him little understanding of Western methods of writing. How could he be expected to know how to write about English literature when he grew up in a non-English speaking society which emphasized science rather than the arts? In order to write successfully at our university, Kah needed to change his patterns of thought so that they corresponded with the intellectual attitudes of his new society.

I felt that it was better to help Kah with the form of his essays at first, rather than the content. Once he learned how to shape an argument, he could concentrate on building up evidence to support it. Kah quickly learned how to put an argument together, but he could not narrow its focus properly. For example, if he had to give the theme of a story and show how it was developed, he would say that the story revealed through "setting, dialogue, and symbol" how the protagonist "grows up from an immature person to a mature person." Clearly, this kind of statement was too general and non-specific. Instead of defining the theme of the story, he had categorized it, and instead of giving the exact elements of the story that revealed the theme, he had simply given their forms.

Kah also had a tendency to overuse certain words which he didn't understand properly. He would say that the life of "modern man" was "empty and meaningless," but he only had a vague idea of what he meant by this grand statement. He could sense a spiritual void in the life of a literary character, but he couldn't describe what was causing it or how it manifested itself.

Even when Kah tried to say something useful or original, he was hampered by his poor understanding of English. He constantly misspelled words and seemed unable to consistently form correct agreements between subjects and verbs. When he wrote a sentence that was grammatically correct, he would often cloak its meaning in general, non-specific language. One line from an in-class essay read: "Obviously, what the protagonist has realized is what the protagonist has learnt and this shows that the protagonist has grown up." If Kah could have shown *how* this idea was presented to the reader, he would have had a valid point.

Another of Kah's problems was his tendency to write about things which were not connected to the given topic. In one essay, he concentrated almost entirely on discussing the setting of a story instead of talking about the theme, which is what the question asked him to do. He seemed to think he was focusing his papers with this approach, but he was doing just the opposite. He thought that a digression from the question was necessary before he began to address it.

Another stumbling block was Kah's inability to explain his ideas. When arguing a point, he would simply make declarative statements which did not show the thought processes which led to their birth. This key element was always missing from his assignments; the one paper which tried to remedy this received a B grade, his best mark of the semester.

Although Kah and I worked for many hours on his writing problems, he did not substantially improve over the course of the semester. He could recognize his failings in our conferences, but not when he was writing his papers. There were some changes in his style, however: his language became clearer in places, and his ideas became more insightful and relevant at certain moments, but the old problems remained. However, I do not think our sessions were unproductive; they gave him an introduction to writing which he needed, and they made him more aware of his own successes and failures. He realized that real

## Fear and Loathing in the Writing Center: How to Deal Fairly with Problem Students

Most students who visit writing centers are easy to work with and grateful for our help. As tutors, however, we occasionally meet students who present more than a simple challenge, due less to syntax than to personality problems. Take Brock, a member of the University of Montana wrestling team. He came to the writing lab for help with a freshman composition paper. The session went well until I noted that his paper had no thesis. He disagreed, and, after a short argument, began pounding the table, flexing his shoulders, and snorting like a buffalo. When my efforts to disarm him failed, and fearing I might end the tutorial in a headlock, I suggested we continue the session at another time.

Only later did I realize Brock's aggression might be rooted in fear, and perhaps I should have tried harder to calm him down enough to deal with his writing problem. Since then, I've worked in three university writing centers, and I've often wished I had the nose of, say, a wasp or a wolf, so I could immediately detect a student's level of fear and separate the truly terrified from the merely obnoxious. For I've come to believe that fear lies at the heart of many of our most troubled students' problems, from those who respond to feedback with hostility to those who respond with tears or the humiliating admission that they never knew how to write and probably never will. We find it difficult to help these students improve as writers because their fears rub off on us, and we may initially feel confusion or the secret dread that we're powerless to help. Therefore, after our first futile effort, we may simply recommend they see another tutor or send them away. I submit however, that such students need us more than most. To treat them fairly we must understand that their writing problems and their rocky relationships with tutors often stem from fear, and to help them as writers, we must overcome enough of our own fears to help them overcome theirs.

Paul Ady says any writing center "is a place that inspires fear and trembling," and for up to ninety percent of students a visit to the center means "facing their deepest fears as writers" (11-12, emphasis in original). The fears associated with writing centers fit into the

broader category of social fears. Among these Stewart Agras includes fear of criticism, fear of meeting strangers, fear of people in authority, fear of public speaking, fear of rejection, and fear of disapproval (122). Obviously, students confront many such fears in writing centers, where they go for criticism, to meet with tutors—who are often strangers and authority figures—to whom they must speak, and by whom their ideas may be rejected.

Even that great motivator, deadline pressure, depends less on hope of reward than on fear of failure, and so increases the anxiety of students seeking help in writing centers. The best writers, armed with past successes and layers of coping mechanisms, still harbor fears of failure. Hemingway, for one, felt so inadequate that he often turned to alcohol, which he referred to as "the 'giant killer,' the ever-helpful ally against fears" (Dardis 195). Imagine the terror of writers who can't build a complete sentence, much less an argument, and whose sole motivation for writing may be to avoid a failing grade. They're certainly more prone than most to suffer from writer's block, which may only lead to the "F" they dreaded so much and may create still more fear.

Writers who would never think of revealing their fears will openly admit to feelings of frustration, but in reality when they speak of one they speak of the other. According to Jeffrey Alan Gray, fear and frustration, as reactions to stress (including the stresses brought on by writing), are so similar that many psychologists believe they are essentially the same. As Gray says, "the state...which is set up by omission of reward is ...very similar to—and perhaps identical with—the state of fear" (174). This theory sounds doubtful since "we are all able to say when we are feeling 'afraid' and when we are feeling 'disappointed' or 'frustrated'" (174). Experiments have shown, however, that the frustration odor (or pheromone) secreted by rats is "very similar to its fear odour [sic]" (14) and "human modes of emotional reaction are essentially the same as those of other animal species" (204). And so Gary defines "anxiety" as an "emotional state which is elicited by...either punishment or non-reward" (204, emphasis in original). He con-



cludes that if "fear and frustration are the same, individuals highly susceptible to one should be highly susceptible to the other"(205).

If he's right, it follows that common reactions to frustration will parallel common reactions to fear, or fight, flight, and paralysis. In reaction to the dangers posed by a writing assignment, fighters may charge head-on, in a defensive attack of the sort Gary claims is "delivered by a frightened animal" (253) against the source of its fear or a handy surrogate—for example, a tutor. Writers who fly from danger may delay work until the last minute and then run to the writing center for rescue. Those who respond with paralysis may, like a mouse facing a snake, be unable to run or fight—a condition reminiscent of writer's block.

Of course, it's difficult to predict how a given student will react to the pressures of a writing assignment since this depends on individual circumstance and personality, but psychologists suggest we might gain insight from character type. The social phobic, for instance, tends to shy away from confrontation, "blushing, looking away rather than maintaining eye contact, slouching rather than talking clearly" (Agras 127). Though her behavior is often less extreme, the introvert tends to suffer silently and remain anxious even though she appears calm. As Gary mentions, the introvert "seldom behaves in an aggressive manner, and does not lose his temper easily" (345). The extravert, on the other hand, "tends to be aggressive and loses his temper quickly" (345).

Based on my wrestler's aggression, Gray would likely identify him as a frustrated extravert. Brock transferred his fear to me through an implied physical threat, to which I responded, in effect, with flight. Few students, however, will fit so readily into a character type and few of our reactions will be so clear cut. This is especially true of Opal, one of the more troubled students I've dealt with in a writing center. She was a victim of sexual abuse as a child and physical abuse as a wife until, in self defense, she filed criminal charges against her husband. As a result, he went to prison, but he was scheduled for release at about the time Opal expected to complete her degree. Or so she said. Meanwhile, she was hurrying to finish in hopes of finding a decent job in another state. Unfortunately, her poor writing skills were slowing her down. I know this because Opal's English teacher sent her to the

center for help with an essay. He'd asked for a five-page autobiographical narrative, and she'd written forty pages on the abuses she'd suffered, which he then refused to accept.

I found tutoring Opal a stressful experience. She was frustrated, defensive, and so prone to violent flare-ups of temper that one of my fellow tutors refused to work with her. Even after I got to know her well, I never felt quite sure how she would react to criticism. One day my advice brought tears, a tirade, or an attack on my shortcomings; the next day it brought a humble and embarrassing gratitude. Despite my sympathy for her, I felt revulsion whenever she came to the center because, like Brock, she sometimes managed to transfer her fears and frustrations to me in ways that effectively blocked the tutoring process.

Most of us derive satisfaction from helping people, which besides our six-figure salaries explains why we work in writing centers. We value not only our knowledge of writing but our ability to communicate it clearly. When students misunderstand our advice, we may put it down to stupidity (theirs), but we also feel panic at having failed at what we do best. If we're unable to help, for whatever reason, or if we've given our best effort and a student is ungrateful—perhaps, God forbid, because she followed our advice straight to a low grade—we experience frustration, which, as Gray says, is akin to fear.

In a recent article in *College English*, Jane Tompkins speaks of a similar fear. As she explains, her urge to perform well as a teacher surfaced in a need to show her students "how smart I was...how knowledgeable I was, and...how well-prepared I was for class" (654). Such performances, she says, are driven by the "fear of being shown up for what you are: a fraud, stupid, ignorant, a clod, a dolt, a sap, a weakling, someone who can't cut the mustard" (654). Like Tompkins, and for the same reasons, we go to great lengths to show students how smart we are, lashing out in defensive attacks against those who uncover our weaknesses—or avoiding further sessions with them. At one writing center, for instance, an otherwise humane fellow tutor once informed me she would no longer work with foreign men, especially Arabs, because she couldn't "stand the attitude or the breath."

The implicit sexism and racism in this

statement may shock us, and offend our sense of fairness, but in milder forms it represents an attitude far from unusual. Most writing centers have that slow, lazy, stubborn, arrogant, or aggressive student no one wants to work with. The moment the student comes in, tutors conversing near the secretary's desk will scatter for their cubicles. Whispered arguments may even break out about who will tutor. This not only embarrasses the student but, in a sense, is an indirect attack on him or her. If she's an extravert, she may aggressively counterattack. If she's an introvert, already plagued by social fears, the insult may simply increase the dread that not only is her writing beyond help but the writing center tutors dislike her. Incidents like this transmit our fears, just as Tompkins' fear of being exposed "must transmit itself to my students" (Tompkins 654). As a result, tutoring becomes difficult and even fruitless.

Assuming we understand the harmful effects of fear, however, can we do anything—short of passing out Valium—to reduce them? I believe we can, if we honestly confront our own feelings. Our loathing when pathetically hopeful Byron shows up at our door, twenty pages of chaos in hand, our disgust when Steve once again compares his style to Faulkner's, and our despair when Christine unjustly blames us for her D, all need to be seen for what they most likely are: expressions of fear.

The following suggestions require only slight changes in attitude on our part, but they may keep us from transferring our fears to already anxious students:

- First, we should not be afraid to fail. Every step we take toward perfectionism is a step away from flexible, creative thinking and toward tension, frustration and fear. The authors of *In Search of Excellence* tell us "you cannot innovate unless you're willing to accept mistakes" (Peters and Waterman 223); neither can we tutor effectively.
- Second, we should remain confident in the value of our work even when students discount it. It might help to remind one another that our aim is to gradually build better writers, not to guarantee 'A' papers, and perhaps the best we can hope for is that students leave tutoring sessions in some small way better

equipped as writers.

- Third, while remaining flexible, we should avoid doing too much for students. Ethical questions aside, if we extensively edit or rewrite a student's work, we may salvage a specific paper but we'll have no lasting impact on the student as a writer except to make him or her more dependent. Meanwhile, we tacitly accept responsibility for each paper's quality, further increasing our own tension.
- Finally, we should remember that even truly obnoxious students may be products of fear and probably are more afraid of us than we are of them. As such, they're worthy of sympathy and understanding, and we should accept them as positive challenges.

If we can reduce our own fears, and the chance we'll communicate them to students, we can then set about reducing student fears and frustrations if we:

- avoid embarrassing situations, such as arguments with other tutors about who should do the tutoring.
- smile with sincere welcome when students come in, a conciliatory gesture that won't always mollify a problem student but will at least start the session out on a peaceful note.
- establish right away that we're on the students' side, that we're sympathetic toward their problems, and that we believe we can help. Often, as Gary A. Olson writes, "pointing out something good" in an otherwise poor paper "will 'break the ice'...and help diminish anxiety" (161).
- work toward voluntary use of our centers. Forced use virtually breeds problem students because, when a professor sends a student to the writing center, Olson says "chances are good that the student's reaction will be hostile" (160). This is especially true when—as in Opal's case—students perceive the center as remedial.
- toss them lifelines, in the form of coping

mechanisms they can use again and again in their writing, rather than simply correct the errors in their papers.

Of these suggestions, the last is perhaps the most practical. Gray cites experiments that prove "the opportunity to perform an effective 'coping' response to fear reduces the deleterious effects of the stressor...even when...actual exposure is held constant" (165). In other words, instead of breaking out our red pens, we ought to teach students coping mechanisms—for instance, a suggested essay structure or a method for fixing comma splices. In this way, we help them avoid similar writing problems in the future, but perhaps more importantly we help them control their fears.

Sometimes, these coping mechanisms may appear to have little to do with writing. Take the case of Betty, for example, who arrived at our writing center late on Friday afternoon in despair over what should have been a simple three-page essay. "It's due Monday," she said and handed me twenty pages of false starts. "I've been working all week and getting nowhere, and now I'm going to flunk the class." A full-time teacher's aide in the public schools, she was taking five education classes and filling the traditional wife-mother roles at home. Except for a tendency to grind to a halt and throw herself on our mercy, she wasn't a problem student. I'd seen her handle tougher assignments, so I gambled that her current hang-up was fear.

"How long has it been since you relaxed and had some fun?" I asked.

She looked baffled. "About three years, I guess. Why?"

"Take tonight off," I said and handed back her false starts. "Eat dinner out, or, better yet, have your husband do the cooking. Tomorrow, take a long walk, go see a movie, go shopping, but don't touch the essay before nine o'clock Sunday morning. Then give yourself until noon to finish."

Judging from her expression, she thought I was deranged, but she agreed to try. On Monday she came in smiling. "It took me five hours, but I did it," she said. "I guess it wasn't as hard as I thought."

Managing fear is hardly a cure-all, of course. Some problem students may have learning disabilities that call for entirely different tactics. Others may be genuinely lazy, muddled, arrogant, neurotic, or otherwise mentally unbalanced, and we may fail to reach them despite our best efforts; to challenge them to achieve, we may even need to inspire a little healthy fear. But if Paul Ady is right, and ninety percent of the students who use writing centers perceive them as places of fear, we may have to control fear—ours and theirs—simply to do our jobs well. Indeed, if we believe young writers need confidence and faith to succeed, this may be our most important function. As psychologist Robert L. DuPont says, "fear and faith cannot coexist" (3-4).

Steve Sherwood  
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## Annual Meeting of the South Carolina Writing Center Association

The South Carolina Writing Center Association (SCWCA), the only state organization of writing centers in the country, held its third annual meeting in Orangeburg, South Carolina, on January 24-25th, 1992. Representing twenty schools in the state, approximately fifty writing center directors and peer tutors came together at SC State College for the meeting's program on "Writing Across the Curriculum: Empowering Writers for the Future."

In her introductory remarks, Jeannie Dobson, president of SCWCA, stressed that writing centers are the "thinking heart" of their schools, supplementing education in a meaningful way each day. And as befits an organization composed of writing centers from across an entire state, President Dobson invited the state superintendent of Education Dr. Barbara Neilsen to be the keynote speaker for the meeting. Dr. Neilsen spoke about the state's goals, while the writing center directors and tutors explained to her how their centers help student writers. Besides the keynote address, lab directors and peer tutors attended informal sessions with discussion and questions from

the audience. Sessions covered issues vital to all writing labs: "Ethics in the Writing Center," "Starting a Writing Center," "Peer Tutoring," and "Writing Across the Curriculum."

Of special interest was a panel "What Works for Me," where five writing lab directors explained their most successful techniques for developing, publicizing, and directing a lab. In particular, the directors offered practical suggestions for how a lab can celebrate the process of writing, keep efficient records, help clients overcome writer's block, publish a newsletter, and develop the professionalism of its peer consultants. This session was so popular and provided so many ideas that it will be included at each year's meetings. As the first state network of writing centers, SCWCA will meet again in 1993 at Converse College in Spartanburg, S.C. For further information, contact Jeannie Dobson, Writing Center, Greenville Technical College, Greenville, S.C. 29606-5616.

Bonnie Devet  
College of Charleston  
Charleston, SC

**WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**  
*Muriel Harris, editor*  
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*West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356*

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writing that is central to higher education" (440).

Phyllis Stevens Endicott  
University of Northern Colorado  
Greeley, CO  
and  
Carol Peterson Haviland  
California State University at  
San Bernadino

*Center Journal* 2 (Fall/Winter 1982):  
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## How We've Grown as a Writing (Across the Curriculum) Center

After its recent visit to Southeast Missouri State University, the North Central Accreditation team reported that the Writing Center is an "academic support service" our university can be proud of. That our students think highly of the Writing Center—that they've been using it and benefiting from the experience—is indicated as well by a steady rate of growth; the number of students we serve has increased from 686 in '86-'87 to 1,038 last year. So far this semester, we've held more than 1,200 conferences. But greater numbers aren't the whole story. Among walk-in students last spring, 70% came to the Center on their own initiative, as opposed to being referred by an instructor; 58% of weekly-conference students were self-referred. Nearly 70% of those weekly-conference students were upperclassmen (36% seniors, 22% juniors); of the walk-ins, 60% were upperclassmen. And 74% of the walk-ins came to confer about writing they were doing for classes outside the English Department.

Our success is not unique, of course. Indeed, it mirrors the trend toward "empowerment" identified by Joan A. Mullin in her survey of writing centers nationwide (*Writing Lab Newsletter* 14.10 [1990]). But perhaps we have been more successful than most writing centers in managing the risks that empowerment brings with it, which Mullin warns us about, of fragmentation and dilution. As

Director of the Writing Center, I'd like to take credit for our achievement, but I can't. It is the result of several factors that in combination would add up to the same result at any university our size (8,500). That's my contention, at any rate. The following description of our program is presented, then, as both a checklist of factors we believe essential for the success of a writing-across-the-curriculum center, and as a model of how the challenges of empowerment can be met through a division of labor.

### Administrative Support

The first factor is administrative support, which means more than money. Our provost believes in the importance of writing and has made writing across the curriculum a top priority. Equally important is the support of the English Department chair, who respects our autonomy while insisting on our link to the department from which we draw our staff and still the largest proportion of students referred for weekly conferences (66% last spring). Perhaps his job is easier in this respect because every full-time member of our department of thirty-five teaches writing, including developmental. But with the chair's approval—and not without it—a new course on "Teaching Writing by the Conference Method" will be added to the department's offerings next semester, a move toward better training of tutors

and recognition of the special expertise our work requires.

### ***An Adequately Equipped, Conveniently Located, and Inviting Facility***

It was the provost and the department chair's idea that we move from a cramped classroom in the English building to newly available space in the library. The space was remodeled according to our plans, with a central area for tables and carrels and, on two sides, staff offices. We tutors have the best of both worlds: camaraderie and semi-privacy when we need it. In addition, the Writing Center is next door to one of the computer centers on campus, a room outfitted with IBM PC's, printers, and typewriters—so students find it convenient to confer with us about drafts-in-progress. We also have computers of our own: eight IBM PC's, one Apple IIe, and one laser and four dot-matrix printers. We have a new copy machine. And a full-time secretary/receptionist. The point is that we're equipped for action, and we're in a location more convenient and inviting than a classroom crammed full of cubicles, a ratty maze. There is something to be said for appearances. In any case, when we moved from the English building to the library, the Writing Lab became the Writing Center in more than name only.

### ***A Staff with Continuity and Expertise***

While graduate students come and go, three Writing Associates add the important element of continuity to our ten-member staff. These are part-time instructors on renewable contracts, MA's experienced in teaching composition in our program and expert at one-on-one, each of whom is available at least ten hours per week in the Center. They, along with the director, are the core of the staff. Without the continuity and expertise they provide, we could not function as the kind of center we aspire to be. We work with faculty as well as students at all levels, from almost every discipline, and from several foreign countries; we help juniors and seniors meet the Writing Proficiency requirement (explained below); we conduct seminars in word processing, taking essay exams, and writing research papers; we consult with faculty about designing assignments and evaluating drafts. A center staffed by peer tutors only or by graduate assistants only, transferring in and out each semester (i.e., the Writing Center as training ground for TA's

before they're permitted to teach in the classroom) could not meet the demands that are placed upon it by our university's commitment to writing across the curriculum. Tutoring in the Center is *not* easier than teaching in the classroom.

### ***Faculty Commitment***

We aim to serve students from all disciplines and all classes, freshman to graduate, non-traditional and international. Informing these students of our services and getting them to drop by involves more than advertising in the student newspaper. It takes a commitment by the entire faculty to the idea that writing is important and that the Writing Center is a valuable resource for themselves as well as their students. Success breeds success, but the faculty's initial commitment was won primarily through the efforts of our Director of Writing Outcomes, whose surveys show exactly how faculty attitudes and practices have changed. Now 80% of the faculty give informal, ungraded writing assignments (compared to 68% two years ago). Seventy-one percent assign "short papers" (59% two years ago). Forty-nine percent assign "long papers" (32% two years ago). To achieve these results, the Director of Writing Outcomes conducted writing-across-the-curriculum workshops in the early stages of our program and now meets individually with a growing contingent of the converted each semester, discussing ways to use more writing in their teaching, and educating them, not incidentally, on how they might utilize the Writing Center.

For example, an instructor from a course on criminal justice requires that her students bring a first draft of an assignment to the Center for some feedback before composing the final version. A chemistry instructor comes to the Center himself to confer with the director and an associate about how best to compose a question on a lab-report form he's writing so that students will develop their responses in adequate detail. In another case, Writing Center staff go to a psychology class to help conduct a small-group, peer evaluation workshop, and to an earth science class to discuss "focus" and "documentation." In more and more cases, instructors mention the Writing Center in their directions for major papers, sending us a copy of the assignment sheet so we'll be prepared to help their students compose a draft that meets the criteria they've

improvement would take longer than just three months and that he should not expect instant results. My conferences with Kah taught me that patience and determination on the part of the tutor and the tutee are essential to a good conference; also, they showed me that a conference's productivity is not always measurable in a teacher's grade.

Mark Paddock  
Peer Tutor  
Memorial University of  
Newfoundland  
St. John's, NF, Canada

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### **Not about Heroes is about Tutors**

A never-ending challenge for writing center directors is staff training. We are fortunate that more and more truly fine materials are becoming available—books, journal articles, newsletter articles—all within our “discipline.” And, of course, we have always relied on good material from other disciplines to help us out. But, for the most part, we limit ourselves to academic/intellectual discussions of tutoring and to “this works for me” kinds of practicums.

Last summer though, I attended the performance of a play that very forcefully struck me as still another source of material for tutor training. The play, *Not About Heroes* by Stephen MacDonald, revolves around the friendship of two poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, who meet at Craiglockhart War Hospital for Nervous Disorders in Edinburgh, in August 1917. It is a drama about war and it is a drama about writing. The two men meet, and the older, Sassoon, undertakes to help young Owen with his writing. This is the part that is so appropriate for us, because in the course of the play we watch the stuttering, uncertain Owen change into a self-assured man and a powerful writer. The “techniques” Sassoon uses to bring this about are the techniques and goals we use and seek. There is nothing earthshaking or new here. But the play does provide, for perhaps one staff meeting, a different way of looking at the same old ideas. And, more important, it underscores the universality of what we do.

Mary Croft  
Plover, WI

### **Price Increase Reminder**

As announced recently, the yearly subscription rate for the *Writing Lab Newsletter* is now \$15 (and U.S. \$20 for Canadian subscribers). Because we lack the person-power to handle invoices and billing, prepayment is necessary. We hope you won't see notices of further price increases for many, many moons.

### **Calendar for Writing Center Associations (WCAs)**

- April 10-11: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Kalamazoo, MI  
Contact: Siham Fares, The Writing Lab, 1044 Moore Hall, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5031
- April 11: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Emmitsburg, MD  
Contact: Carl Glover, Writing and Communications Program, Mount St. Mary's College, Emmitsburg, MD 21727.
- April 11: New England Writing Centers Association, in Fall River, MA  
Contact: Ron Weisberger, Bristol Community College, 777 Elsbree St., Fall River, MA 02720
- April 22-25: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Colonial Williamsburg  
Contact: Tom MacLennan, The Writing Place, The University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, NC 28403-3297
- Oct. 2-3: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Paul, MN  
Contact: Dave Healy, General College, 240 Appleby Hall, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455
- Oct. 15-17: Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association, in Ogden, Utah  
Contact: M. Clare Sweeney, 2625 College Avenue South #5, Tempe, AZ 85282-2344

# WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Vol. I, No. 1 (April, 1977)

## WE ARE LAUNCHED!

Here is the first issue of THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER proposed at the 4 C's, and our first order of business is to have each other's names. Enclosed is an initial list, but as you spread the word and encourage other lab people to join us, supplementary lists will be included in future newsletters.

Equally important are your contributions to the newsletter. Send your questions, announcements, news, evaluations of some materials you use, suggestions for the format, content, and title of the newsletter, offers to take on projects, requests for some particular bit of information, etc. Our intention is to keep the newsletter brief, useful, and informal.

In the interest of mollifying my department's keeper of the budget, I would appreciate some small donation (perhaps a dollar?) to help cover duplicating and mailing costs, but this will certainly not be mandatory. Most of all, at this embryonic stage of our newsletter, we need your interest and your input. Let's keep in touch!

Send your notices to:

Muriel Harris  
Dept. of English  
Purdue University  
West Lafayette, In. 47907

## SET II WRITE-A Conference on the Teaching of Writing

You may be interested in a conference, on May 6-7, at Illinois State University (Normal, Il.), described as follows:

Teachers are being held accountable for the quality of their students' writing, yet new developments in linguistics, psychology, and mass media make it increasingly difficult to know how to teach composition and creative writing. This conference offers writers and teachers in the Midwest an opportunity to meet and discuss common problems. The focus will be on all types of writing--expository, creative writing, technical writing, writing for children, and journalism--with an emphasis on teaching. The conference features workshops as well as papers and an address by Ray Kytle.

The deadline for pre-registration is April 25. For a brochure which describes the program in detail and includes the pre-registration form, contact:

Janice Neuleib, Program Coordinator  
Dept. of English  
Stevenson Hall  
Illinois State Univ.  
Bloomington-Normal, Il. 61761

## QUERIES & QUESTIONS

### WE CAN-AN ESL Newsletter

If you are interested in subscribing (at no cost) to WE CAN, a newsletter emphasizing reviews of materials and techniques for ESL, both reading and writing skills as well as basic education, contact:

Florence E. Snyder, Editor  
Manhattan Adult Learning Center  
2031 Casement Rd.  
Manhattan, Ks. 66502

At the Saturday morning 4C's session there was some discussion of the Auto-Tutor branching system of self-instruction. Can someone who is familiar with it send in a brief description and an address?

If you are interested in making contact with an Illinois group working in learning skills centers or would like a list of materials, an announcement of a meeting in the fall, or a mailing list, contact:

Janice Neuleib  
Dept. of English  
Stevenson Hall  
Illinois State Univ.  
Bloomington-Normal, Il. 61761

Has anyone used the Westinghouse self-instruction materials with speakers of non-standard English, and, if so, with what results? Please send comments and other information to:

Mary Epes  
York College of CUNY  
Jamaica, N.Y. 11451

Amy Richards (Wayne State) has suggested that we consider the possibility of forming a bank or repository for copies of our own home-made lab materials. If anyone is interested in undertaking such a project and has funds for copying, secretarial help, let us know. Might someone find some grant money for such a project? Until this gets off the ground, you may want to send us notices for future newsletters, of what you have available that you'd be willing to share. Please include a short description of the material, its format, and any stipulations you might have for sending out a copy (e.g., reimbursement for mailing costs, duplicating a tape, etc.).

There is an obvious interest in and need for a list of established labs. Does anyone have any lists to start our collation? Would anyone care to volunteer to be the compiler?