

The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

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

Volume 17, Number 1

September, 1992

....from the editor....

Welcome back to the pages of the newsletter! If you are feeling particularly frenzied by the chaos of the new semester, this first issue of Volume 17 should provide a welcome opportunity to fill your coffee cup, sit down, and start reading.

The articles in this issue were originally presented as papers in a panel at the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Cincinnati, and they are reprinted here so that those of us who were there can listen again and contemplate what we heard. Those who missed that presentation can now read and enter the conversation initiated by the thought-provoking insights of Byron Stay, Nancy Grimm, and Michael Pemberton.

The issues raised by these essays invite further discussion, so please join in the conversation by sending your comments and reactions to the newsletter. In the meantime, happy new semester.

•Muriel Harris, editor

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Writing Centers on the Margins: Conversing from the Edge

Stephen North, in a recent *Writing Center Journal* interview with Lil Brannon, uses the metaphor of conversation to talk about writing centers. One kind of conversation, he says, takes place between students and faculty within the context of the writing center:

When we try to extend that conversation outside of that circle, say to talk about writing across the curriculum, then suddenly we're a far more threatening entity than we were when it was a place where students went But the writing center has to stay on the margins, in a sense, in order to be effective. (8)

I wonder if this is true, and if it is, what implications such marginalization has for writing centers. However, I'm neither convinced that marginalized centers are necessary to teach marginalized students nor that marginalized centers serve the needs of writing center profes-

sionals. Of course, not all writing centers are marginalized; some have access to adequate resources, staff, and funding. But as I've talked with writing center professionals in workshops, in regional and national meetings, and in private conversation, I've heard them talk about their sense of powerlessness and frustration. Marginalization, if not universal, is at least a significant problem for writing centers nationally.

The problem is that writing centers don't just exist on *the* margin; they exist on many margins. Part of this marginalization is shared with all composition teachers. Like all composition teachers, writing center professionals tend to operate on the fringe of English departments. Often, these departments view writing centers as "academic support programs" that teach "skills." If they address English department goals at all, they may serve to prepare students to experience the "greater good" of reading literature.

Many (though not all) writing center professionals serve in English departments without faculty status and without hope for tenure. Many have no vote in department meetings. It's not surprising that professionals are seen as "staff" and writing centers as fix-it shops. In many institutions writing centers are simply not recognized as places of academic rigor. Those professionals who have faculty status must address questions for promotion that their literature colleagues do not: What counts for research? What counts for tenure? Does an ethnographic study on collaboration count as much as a textual study of Milton? Better still, what if it's a collaboratively written ethnographic study on collaboration?

Writing center professionals share this marginalization only in part with composition teachers, if at all. The question of what counts for research and tenure has particular liability in writing centers, especially if one admits that the data for research comes out of experience teaching in a center.

Ironically, the issue of marginalization may be less evident on an institutional level. Writing centers can at least be instructionally useful to institutions in ways they are usually not for English departments. Only indirectly do centers speak to English department goals, but they speak to institutional goals in many ways. One can argue, for instance, that writing cen-

ters can have a significant effect on attrition, and if the evidence is not verifiable, it's at least anecdotal (Simpson). Writing centers provide support for minority and disadvantaged students, for ESL and returning students. These arguments have great weight institutionally but virtually none at all departmentally, and both arguments are persuasive in times of shrinking enrollments and increasing numbers of non-traditional students.

Writing centers are further marginalized professionally and politically by the discipline of rhetoric and composition, although judging from the increased number of writing center sessions at the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication, the situation appears to be getting better. Writing center articles still do not normally appear in major journals outside the *Writing Center Journal*, the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, and occasionally, *Focuses*.

Politically, our causes have not yet been taken up sufficiently by organizations like NCTE. Writing centers appear only once in the College Composition and Communication's *Statement on Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing* in a bland three-sentence reference ending with this statement: "Because writing centers enhance

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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.

the conditions of teaching and learning, their development and support should be an important departmental and institutional priority" (4). It's clear we have a very long way to go to reach this goal.

I would like to suggest that our professional marginalization results in part because we have only begun conversing with our institutions and with our discipline. We need to establish a symbiotic relationship with others in the discipline of rhetoric and composition. On the one hand, rhetorical theory ought to inform writing centers; on the other hand, writing center data ought to be used to build theory to take back to our professional journals.

Engaging in this conversation will not be easy. Many painful questions must first be addressed: How can writing center professionals converse with their discipline when the departments in which they reside provide neither encouragement nor recognition for their efforts? How can they converse when they have no vote at the department level, or no possibility for tenure or promotion? When they have little or no travel funds and no sabbaticals? When their research is seen as a diversion from their real task of teaching skills?

As writing center professionals, we need to challenge marginalization both individually and collectively. First, we need to work in every way we can for increased departmental and institutional recognition. Writing center professionals need full faculty status. We might consider models of administration other than the traditional writing center in the English department. We should actively consider the implications of situating writing centers on the institutional level, perhaps reporting to a dean or provost. This model does not necessarily make writing centers more vulnerable to budgetary cuts. As Joyce Kinkead indicates, the higher up the ladder writing centers situate themselves in the institutional hierarchy, the more funding will be available to them.

If possible, we might consider moving toward separate independent departments. At Mount St. Mary's College, for instance, the administration recently created a Department of Rhetoric and Writing to offer a major and to house the writing center. Re-situating writing centers also means re-defining the writing center's role to include reaching out to other departments—to sociology and business, engi-

neering and nursing. It means finding ways to serve the needs of the community outside the institution.

Second, we need to encourage the NCTE to acknowledge marginalization of writing centers the way it has for part-timers, and this ought to be a significant responsibility of the National Writing Centers Association.

Third, we need to begin conversing on local, regional, and national levels with each other and with others in the discipline. We need to publish in *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, *Rhetoric Review*, and *Research in the Teaching of English*. We need to establish the kind of conversation Lisa Ede advocates in her 1989 *Writing Center Journal* article "Writing as a Social Process: A Theoretical Foundation for Writing Centers?"

Writing center professionals also need to realize that they have something important to say nationally. We need to speak out on issues like national testing. This also is a responsibility of our regional and national associations.

Things aren't as bad as they were a few years ago, but they've got to improve. Writing centers have considerable potential to exert influence institutionally and nationally (if not departmentally). Our marginalization results in part from a community that does not value one-on-one instruction, but it's partly of our own making. We must get better at identifying the sources of power at our institutions and tapping into them. Maurice Scharton calls for writing center professionals to identify institutional values and line up behind them. Our national and regional associations need to be our voice on national and regional issues, but we must address our marginalization at our own institutions. Then maybe, just maybe, writing centers can become, as the pseudonymous Hugh Campbell wrote recently, "one of the intellectual centers of the university" (370).

Byron L. Stay
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Emmitsburg, MD

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Minutes of the National Writing Centers Association Executive Board Meeting March 23, 1992, Cincinnati CCCC

Board Members Present: Pat Dyer, Lady Falls Brown, Nancy Grimm, Dave Healy, Sally Fitzgerald, Diana George, Steve Kucharik, Ed Lotto, Sally Crisp, Al DeCiccio, M. Claire Sweeney, Byron Stay, Rosemary O'Donoghue, Joe Saling.

Guests Present: Eric Hobson, Wilkie Leith, Alan Jackson, Michael Condon, Martha Marinara, Bob Child.

President Pat Dyer called the meeting to order at 2:02 p.m. Bob Child represented the East Central Association in place of Lois Green, and Eric Hobson was filling in for Ray Wallace. The

minutes of the November meeting were approved.

Nancy Grimm, executive secretary, reported that the treasury balance was \$3,798.05. New and renewed memberships brought in \$1010 since the last meeting. Expenses totaled \$131.98. Nancy Grimm reminded the members that nominations for one at-large representative will be accepted until May 1. A nomination form is available from her. Applications for the \$200 graduate student scholarship are due by April 15.

Old Business

Members discussed ways to promote the NWCA. Eric Hobson and Alan Jackson volunteered to design a new flyer. A motion setting a \$350 limit on the printing expense was passed. Members also discussed planning an information exchange table for national conferences, promoting NWCA with high school colleagues, and encouraging their university and college libraries to subscribe to *The Writing Center Journal*.

Reports

A. *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Members were reminded that Muriel Harris is interested in articles, particularly for the tutor's column. The *Writing Lab Newsletter* will also print announcements for conferences and the sale of proceedings.

B. *Writing Center Journal*. Diana George raised the issue of setting up a separate review board for the Journal instead of relying on the NWCA executive board. The purpose of this change would be to insure that manuscripts get a prompt and thorough review. After some discussion, the members of the board passed a motion made by Diana George and seconded by Byron Stay and Al DeCiccio to allow the editors to establish an editorial review board. Sally Fitzgerald recommended that the editors insure diversity on the board by taking in consideration geographical distribution, experience, race, gender, type of institutional affiliation, etc. The general membership is encouraged to submit names and qualifications to the editors for consideration.

C. *Writing Center Directory*. Copies are available from Pam Farrell. Make checks payable to McCallie School for \$15.

Contesting "The Idea of a Writing Center": The Politics of Writing Center Research

One of the most positive influences on the professional lives of writing center workers in the last decade was Stephen North's "The Idea of a Writing Center," published in *College English* in 1984. In this frequently quoted essay, North declared independence for writing centers, denounced the fix-it shop mentality, and articulated the values underlying writing center work. His idea of a writing center amounted to what he calls "a perfect world" where writers had their own ready auditor, where writers found people who knew how to listen, how to talk about writing, how to ask them questions they would not think to ask themselves. I still find inspiration when I reread my tattered copy of "The Idea of a Writing Center," but I also find meanings I would like to contest, particularly because they limit our vision of what writing center research can do. I approach this piece with respect, but also with the conviction that writing center work is much more politically and ideologically charged than North's essay indicates. I think writing centers have much to teach the profession about how difference is managed in the academy and about how students' subjectivities are constructed by educational discourse. We can't do that until we think about how our discourse has constructed us.

One of North's central arguments is that the essence of writing center method is talk, a point that few would contest. Yet he also maintains that "a writing center is an institutional response" to the need of writers to talk about their writing. In the margin next to that statement, I wrote "since when do institutions respond to such needs?" The talk that occurs in writing centers is often the kind of talk that is difficult to sustain in institutional space—it is playful, non-instrumental, multidimensional and multi-vocal. It is the kind of talk that I struggle and often fail to develop in my classroom space. Yet educational institutions generally promote functional talk, and they fund writing centers because they want to develop functional literacy. The unhappy metaphors of hospital, clinic, and prison that haunt writing centers are a result of the notion

that writing centers are institutional mechanisms, or what Foucault would call disciplinary mechanisms for helping students write and speak correctly, effectively, and according to discourse conventions. Revisionist literacy theorists such as Brian Street and J. Elspeth Stuckey argue that literacy is embedded in complex ideological social systems, systems that often use literacy to classify and to exclude. These theorists convince me that we can no longer pretend that talk about writing is a neutral, value-free activity. Writing centers are places where students struggle to connect their public and private lives, and where they learn that success in the academy depends on uncovering and understanding tacit differences in value systems and expectations.

Research in the writing center can examine those struggles and emerge with a more critical sense of the effect of our curriculum and teaching practices, but often it doesn't. If we think of the nature of our work as neutral, value-free and institutionally sanctioned, we are more likely to focus our research on how we can help students write better assignments, how we can train tutors to be more effective at helping students write better assignments, how we can improve our image and promote our services. For many the survey is the research instrument of choice, and its central question is often "How can we do what you want us to do better?" Such research assumes that the institution is fine, that writing centers just have to figure out ways to help students fit in better.

One of North's key arguments is that writing centers do not exist "to serve, supplement, back up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum." Yet writing center work is defined by the curriculum in unavoidable ways because students come to us for help interpreting the curriculum. North insists that teachers don't need writing centers, yet he promises to "support the teacher's position completely." According to North, writing centers cannot change the context; "all we can do is help the writer learn

how to operate in it and other contexts like it." North's promise prevents writing centers from producing research that questions institutional, pedagogical, or curricular practices. To me, these are the important questions, the questions most worth asking. Working with students in a writing center changes perceptual horizons and alters perspectives. Our excursions into students' heads, like our excursions into films and novels, change the way we see and the way we act and the way we think and the way we teach. Our promise to support the teachers' position completely prevents us from sharing these altered perspectives that can in turn change the rhetorical context of teaching. In a writing center, one discovers how smart students are and how arbitrary and limiting linguistic conventions and educational hierarchies can be. One reason writing centers have not articulated these understandings is that the field of composition studies has been under the influence of the warmly persuasive metaphor of community. Writing center workers see themselves as the gracious hosts, people who initiate writers into the ways of discourse communities.

Recently, some theorists have begun to critique the notion of community as suggesting a largely utopian and normalizing vision. Mary Louise Pratt argues that the notion of linguistic community is anchored in a vision of a unified social world, a vision that is idealized, imagined, and utopian. In such a vision interpretive differences simply indicate natural boundaries between communities. Imagining differences as natural boundaries just like rivers and mountain ranges does not allow us to think of communities as sites of social struggle where relations between dominant and dominated groups are enacted. Studying the language of an idealized community focuses attention on the achievement of *authorized* objectives, rather than allowing for a questioning of authoritative structures. Pratt proposes an alternative to the notion of linguistic community—the idea of linguistic contact zones, where dominant and dominated groups and speakers of different languages interact. Thinking of writing centers as linguistic contact zones would politicize our research. It should encourage us to think about how we constitute one another relationally in language and how we deal with difference. Tom Fox has argued that writing centers can become essential settings for expanding our definition of literacy

in ways that legitimize marginalized voices and experiences.

Some writing center researchers have already begun to move in this direction. I'd like to close by focusing on one of those. In the spring issue of *The Writing Center Journal*, there is a beautifully written essay by Anne DiPardo which follows the work of an African American tutor, Morgan, and a Navajo student, Fannie. DiPardo concludes with some fairly negative things to say about Morgan's attempt to reach Fannie and argues that Morgan needed to talk less and listen more. DiPardo's essay includes a careful analysis of Fannie's educational and linguistic history. The essay does not include an analysis of Morgan's history, but does say that Morgan grew up in the predominantly Anglo, middle-class community that surrounded the campus. It also mentions that Morgan attended a CCCO conference and returned with a vision of collaboration as "a fossilized creed," "a shield," a set of techniques rather than a new way to think about teaching and learning. For me, if not for DiPardo, Morgan is an example of a student whom we have successfully socialized into the system, a system that needs to rethink the way it deals with difference. Morgan looks a lot like us, she is idealistic and well intentioned, but replete with prepackaged understandings that make her insufficiently curious. Morgan, like many of us, needs a self-critical stance, a reflective stance, a stance that will help us learn more about students like Fannie and encourage us to examine what we really do in writing centers.

Writing center research has avoided these issues because of unexamined promises and philosophies. The goal of our research should be to open a dialogue with English departments and with the institution as a whole, to rethink the way we practice literacy, to renegotiate a relationship with teachers of writing. It should help us think about how we might *change* the context of teaching because of what we learn about students like Fannie. When North's essay was published eight years ago, it provided a much needed self-validation for people who worked in writing centers. It is time, however, to stop talking only to ourselves.

Nancy Grimm
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Houghton, Michigan

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NWCA Minutes

(cont. from p.4)

D. NCTE Workshops. About 60 people attended, mostly middle school and high school people.

E. CEL. Pat Dyer will ask Pam Farrell to keep this contact going.

Members discussed the importance of other coalitions. Wilkie Leigh will make contact with WPA and submit an article to *Writing Lab Newsletter*.

F. CCCC Presentation. Ray Wallace has asked for three speakers on the topic "Idea of a Writing Center Revisited: Reaching Out to New Populations." Members recommended a roundtable format to encourage interaction.

G. Special Interest Committee Reports

Peer Tutor Committee

Nancy Grimm read a letter from Ellen Mohr, chair of the committee, indicating

that three individuals have volunteered to serve as consultants on the peer tutor committee: Barbara Roswell at Goucher College in Towson, Maryland; Melinda Gunning at West Coast Christian College in Fresno, California; and Ted McFerrin at Collin County Community College, Spring Creek Campus, Dallas, Texas. The committee is preparing a comprehensive bibliography that will be available to the organization. Members discussed ways to disseminate information such as this. Eric Hobson volunteered to look into options.

ESL Committee

Al DeCiccio volunteered to chair this committee in place of Lady Falls Brown.

Starting a Writing Center

Eric Hobson volunteered to coordinate this committee.

Writing Center Administration

Wilkie Leigh volunteered to coordinate.

Computers

Claire Sweeney indicated she had received a couple of dozen calls on computers in writing centers.

Research in the Writing Center

Pat Dyer reported that she would look into ways to network those interested in this topic.

Assessment/Evaluation

Sally Crisp reported receiving calls from three people.

H. Regional Reports

The New England Conference will be held April 11 at Bristol Community College. The Mid-Atlantic Conference is scheduled for April 10 and 11 at Mount Saint Mary's College with Steve North as keynote speaker. The Rocky Mountain regional coordinates its conference with the Rocky Mountain MLA. Their conference is planned for October 15-17 in Ogden. East Central will host their conference on April 10 and 11 in Kalamazoo with Art Young as keynote speaker. The South Central fall conference was held at Texas Christian. They are planning to move to spring conferences. The Midwest Association plans their conference for October 2-3 in St. Paul with Steve North as keynote speaker. The South-Eastern conference is planned for April 22-24 with Dr. Christopher Thaiss as keynote speaker.

Members discussed the advantages and disadvantages of publishing the proceedings of regional conferences and the possibility of

developing archives. Dave Healy pointed out that publishing proceedings indirectly encourages participants to read papers rather than engaging the audience in discussion.

New Business

1. Scholarship Award: Alice Gillam and Muriel Harris won the writing center scholarship award for 1992.
2. Members discussed the revision of the CCCC Principles and Standards Statement. Byron Stay will contact Jim Slevin to inquire about the status of the revision process and the possibility of input from the NWCA.

The meeting adjourned at 4:08 p.m.

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

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. 3: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in Malibu, CA
Contact: Cindy Novak, Humanities Division, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA 90263.

Oct. 15-17: Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association, in Ogden, Utah
Contact: M. Clare Sweeney, 2625 College Avenue South #5, Tempe, AZ 85282-2344

Jan. 29: South Carolina Writing Center Association, in Spartanburg, SC
Contact: Bonnie Auslander, Writing Center, Converse College, Spartanburg, SC 29301

March 12-13: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Muncie, IN
Contact: Laura Helms and Cindy Johaneck, Learning Center, University College, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306

**8th Annual Pacific Coast
Writing Centers Association
Conference
October 3, 1992
Malibu, CA**

For information contact Cindy Novak, Humanities Division, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA 90263 (310-456-4094) or Julie Smith (310-456-4097).

**9th Annual National Conference
on Peer Tutoring in Writing**

**October 23-24, 1992
Indiana, PA**

Keynote speaker: Wendy Bishop

The Conference is a forum for addressing issues related to tutor training and supervision, conferencing styles, student diversity, research in writing centers, starting a writing center, using computers, tutoring ESL students, and networking across campus. The NCPTW welcomes participation by peer tutors, faculty, and writing program administrators.

For registration and information, contact Lea Masiello and Ben Rafoth, Conference Co-chairs, Indiana U. of Pennsylvania, English Department, Indiana, PA 15705-1094. Telephone: (412) 357-3029. BitNet: BRafoth@IUP.

**4th National Basic Writing
Conference**

**October 8-10, 1992
University of Maryland at College Park**

**"Critical Issues in Basic Writing: 1992"
Keynote Speaker: David Bartholomae**

For details and registration information, contact John Garvey, Education Director, NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801. Phone: 217-328-3870.

Tutors' Column

A Tutor Needs to Know the Subject Matter to Help a Student with a Paper: Agree _____ Disagree _____ Not Sure _____

The above survey item was presented to a group of about twenty writing tutors at an in-service meeting earlier this semester. I immediately disagreed with the premise, as did the majority of the tutors present. I believe we shared a common reaction because we are all, to some degree, "ignorant" tutors. Yet what we do possess is knowledge crucial to the success of a tutoring session—a good sense of the components of clear, effective writing.

Such subject "ignorance" may, on the surface, appear to be a handicap that impairs the tutor's ability to serve as a capable learning tool for the student. My experience as a tutor, however, has led me to recognize that writing assistants can often be more helpful if they have no prior knowledge of a paper's subject matter.

The tutor who has a thorough understanding of a particular topic is often blinded to the point the student is trying to make in his or her paper. Instead of listening to the client and helping him clarify his own ideas, the "knowledgeable" assistant tends to ask leading questions and make recommendations based on how the tutor would approach the assignment.

Susan M. Hubbuch, Director of the Writing Center at Lewis and Clark College, agrees. She defends her position in an article (the title of which I borrowed for my own article) published in *The Writing Center Journal*. Hubbuch states that the first priority of the content-ignorant writing tutor is to encourage his or her student to become an active learner. The direct answers provided by a tutor knowledgeable in the subject matter of the paper may very well discourage the student from discovering the information for himself and writing a paper with original ideas. Spoonfeeding of this type in fact defeats the purpose of the tutoring session. This approach could make the doubtful student lean toward passivity and assume

that there is a specific formula for good writing that needs only to be filled in by the tutor.

Nevertheless, the merits of the knowledgeable tutor cannot be ignored. At the most basic level, the tutor's ability to explain quickly a concept pertinent to the paper allows more time for emphasis on the higher priority of the session—the writing task at hand. In addition, the tutor who has specific knowledge of a certain subject, like history, will be able to spot inaccurate facts which, if included in the final draft, could prove detrimental to the student's understanding of the event and to the paper's grade.

However, the "ignorant" tutor still possesses a key advantage: he is not blinded to weak connections between sections of an argument by his thorough understanding of the paper's topic. The assistant cannot boast a Ph.D., but he can use his strength in the area of writing to act as an intelligent and perceptive reader and demand vital and logical transitions between paragraphs. Thus, if the assistant has difficulty following the argument in a student's paper, it is more than likely that the professor, too, will notice the same weakness.

As the tutoring session progresses, the student's explanation of the material and his own interpretation usually reveal what the student knows and what he may have to clarify in the rewritten version of his paper. Included in the tutor-student dialogue must be the latter's clarification of his basic premises and definition of any important terms. Attention to these details will ensure that the paper is "self-contained" and will thus increase the strength of the student's thesis.

Hubbuch rightly acknowledges the fact that, as a writing specialist, she must at least be aware that different subjects call for different writing styles, especially when it comes to

source documentation, organizational structure, and voice. The tutor, too, "must be aware that the universe of discourse has a varied and diverse terrain." It is important that the tutor not approach the session with an overgeneralised, oversimplified conception of "good" writing.

An effective and successful writing tutor, then, serves as a sounding board for the student. It is not the tutor's expertise in a particular subject that most benefits the client who seeks help with a paper. A clear main idea, supporting evidence and examples, readability, good sense, and self-sufficiency—these are the elements of an effective paper. It is the tutor's special sensitivity to these factors that makes the student's appointment hour most productive and worthwhile.

Margaret Ann Simonian
Peer Tutor
Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles, CA

Work Cited

Hubbuck, Susan M. "A Tutor Needs to Know the Subject Matter to Help a Student with a Paper: Agree ___ Disagree ___ Not Sure ___." *Writing Center Journal* 8.2 (Spring-Summer 1988): 23-30.

A Reader Comments....

Discussion comments at a lively writing center presentation during the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Cincinnati last March sparked a concern which, as so often happens, I couldn't begin to articulate until later. It has to do with a perceived lack of decision-making power that writing center directors actually feel about their situations within the variety of institutional configurations that were discussed during conference sessions. In other words, whether the writing center is part of an English Department, or a study skills center, or student affairs office (or all three and more!) may not be

as much a source of delight or disgruntlement as the fact that it was Somebody Else's decision to put it and keep it there—and then hire someone to run it. I am now curious about how writing center directors perceive their roles as decision-makers—whether they feel they can initiate "revision" of their situations or feel trapped in configurations not of their own devising.

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8th Annual Conference on the Teaching of Writing

October 23, 1992

**Bristol Community College
Fall River, MA**

***"The Writing Teacher as an Agent
for Change"***

Keynote speaker: Ira Shor

This conference provides a forum to discuss issues related to the teaching of writing and offers an opportunity for professional development for high school and college faculty in southeastern New England. For information contact Howard Tinberg, Bristol Community College, 777 Elsbree Street, Fall River, MA 02720 (508-678-2811, ext. 282).

The Prison, the Hospital, and the Madhouse: Redefining Metaphors for the Writing Center

Let me provide a context for this article by relating three short anecdotes, all of which describe incidents that took place in the University of Illinois Writers' Workshop last year:

Incident #1: A female student from Rhetoric 105, the university's version of freshman composition, entered my cubicle in the Writer's Workshop for an impromptu conference. We talked informally for a minute or two, and I tried to reassure her with all the appropriate cues that I was there to help her with her draft, not evaluate it. She somewhat timidly got out the written text she wanted to discuss, in this case an essay about television violence that her instructor had returned to her, and I found it was literally dripping with red lines, red circles, and red marginalia. At the end of the essay was a somewhat longer commentary on her failings—again, in red—concluding with the directive: "Take this paper to the writing lab and get the tutor to help you rewrite it." When we looked at the paper, we talked about some of its problems in organization, in development, and in syntax. This was a bright student; she thought well and she wrote well, though she seemed rather diffident and subdued. As we ended our tutorial session, she handed me a sheet of paper with a place for my signature and said, "Can you sign this form that says I talked to you? My instructor wants some proof that I was here."

Incident #2: A sophomore history student came to see one of our tutors with a draft of a paper for his economics class. He didn't seem particularly thrilled to be in the Workshop. His responses to the tutor's attempts at small talk were quite small themselves—short, curt, and anxious to get on to "important" matters. When the tutor suggested they look at his draft, he pulled it out and passed it over to her saying, "I want you to look at this and tell me what's wrong with it and how to fix it." His instructor, he said, had looked at the draft,

told him that the writing was "pretty bad"—focusing particularly on the writer's "wordiness"—and suggested that the people in the "writing clinic" should have a look at it. "They're the experts," he said, "and they can tell you what's wrong with it better than I can." When our conference was over, the student asked the tutor if we had any handouts or exercises on how to cure wordiness.

Incident #3: An instructor stormed into the Workshop with a student in tow. He was angry; she was cowed. He demanded to see one of the tutors. When the available tutor stepped out, the instructor glared, pointed at the student he'd brought in and said, "I want you to take this student and show her how to fix this paper. I've had it! I can't do anything with her! I'm beginning to think she's hopeless. I can't believe that she's a senior and she writes this badly. I hope you can do something with her because I certainly can't!" This said, the instructor departed, leaving in his wake a stunned tutor and a student on the verge of tears.

I begin with these three incidents for two reasons. First, I believe that nearly everyone who directs a writing center or tutors in one will recognize them immediately and recall similar incidents in their own experience, but second, and more importantly, I think these incidents are illustrative of three particular points of view that students and instructors often share about the purpose or place or mission which writing centers have in educational institutions. I believe that these points of view are highly metaphorical; they conceive of writing centers not directly, in terms of what they actually *are*, but associatively, in terms of what they seem to resemble. This ontological activity is quite common, as Lakoff and Johnson note in their book, *Metaphors We Live By*, a hallmark, in some ways, of the way we think and construct our mental worlds. When confronted by situations, entities, or activities that are somewhat unfamiliar to us, we make

use of "structural metaphors"—concepts with which we are already well acquainted—to understand them:

Structural metaphors allow us to do much more than just orient concepts, refer to them, quantify them, etc., as we do with simple orientational and ontological metaphors; they allow us, in addition, to use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another. (Lakoff and Johnson 61)

Writing centers are, in many respects, ripe for structural metaphoricity. To instructors and students in disciplines other than English (and often, according to Stephen North, even within English), writing centers are often unfamiliar or unknown entities. They are places where tutors talk about writing and usage and—according to the popular belief—the rudiments of grammar, but beyond this, the activities which take place there may seem mysterious and arcane (Hughes). Instructors and students often have only the vaguest notions of how writing skills are actually taught or what sort of epistemology grounds a writing center, so they tend to conceive of writing centers in metaphorical terms, as representations of other institutions which perform seemingly related functions. Though the metaphorical constructions which people use to understand writing centers are no doubt diverse, I would like to identify and describe in this article three of the most pervasive and pernicious. They are: the Writing Center as Prison, the Writing Center as Hospital, and the Writing Center as Madhouse. Each of these metaphorical constructs, I believe, grossly misrepresents writing centers and subverts their entire approach to the learning (and writing) process. Though some of their features may be attractive, the metaphors taken as a whole work to undermine the fundamental strengths of individual tutorials and create an atmosphere in which writing conferences are foredoomed to failure. Only by understanding how these metaphors operate and what effects they have on instructors, tutors, and students will we be able to confront them directly and replace them with other constructs that are far more realistic and, as a consequence, far more beneficial to the centers themselves.

The Writing Center as Prison

The incident with the student who asked

me to sign her attendance form is emblematic, I think, of the writing center as prison. The characteristic feature of this metaphor is that the writing center is a place of punishment. Students are caught by instructors in the act of committing linguistic crimes, and are sentenced to the center for correction. Like petty criminals, they have to serve 1-5 visits at "hard grammar," rehabilitating themselves until they reach the point where they are ready to reenter their discourse community. The classroom instructors, in this model, envision themselves as officer, judge, and jury, keeping a watchful eye on the writing (usually grammar) of their charges, issuing tickets in red ink for minor infractions, making arrests of willful linguistic offenders, and sending them to the "Big House" where they'll learn not to misplace innocent modifiers or assault helpless syntactic conventions.

The students who are sent to the writing center see themselves, as one might expect, as society's criminals, judged guilty of crimes they didn't know how not to commit, and often resentful of being punished despite their good intentions. Some students react to their fates passively, blaming themselves for imagined failings, shuffling along on the writing center chain gang, doing their exercises, making their revisions, looking forward to the day they're released from bondage; other students react angrily, blaming society as embodied in instructors and tutors, refusing to cooperate with any aspect of their incarceration. They become reluctant, recalcitrant, and uncooperative in conferences; they realize their physical presence is required, but their mental presence defiantly remains elsewhere.

Writing center tutors are trapped by this metaphor, forced to become reluctant guards, wardens, and parole boards. They are required to verify that the students attend, they have the responsibility to correct deviant behaviors, and they are given the burden of certifying whether or not students have been "rehabilitated." Within this particular vision of the center, even the best intentions and most enlightened tutoring philosophy get subverted, co-opted into the dominant metaphor. Advice or suggestions are interpreted as orders—the students wouldn't be there if they hadn't done something wrong, and obviously the tutor is the one in control, the one who holds the keys to the prison house door. Seen through the metaphorical filter of prison life, the student in-

mates know that a suggestion is nothing more than a command in polite language. Attempts to draw out students in conversation are immediately greeted with suspicion and mistrust; they are interpreted as attempts at deception or subterfuge, of trying to coerce the student into revealing something even more damaging about him or herself. In the students' eyes, the tutors and instructors become examples of the good cop/bad cop dynamic: "Wouldn't you rather tell *me* about your writing weaknesses and anxieties than have your *instructor* catch you again?"

The harm done by this metaphorical view of writing centers is all too clear. The atmosphere of trust, cooperation, and support we try to establish is never given a chance to exist. It is completely foreign to the metaphor's featural structure. The writing center is a place of punishment: attendance is forced, activities are supervised by authority figures, and those who are sentenced for any length of time must cope with social stigmatization. As Gary Olson notes quite pointedly, many of our own colleagues freely admit "that they have no regard for the writing center and the type of student who is sent there" (155).

Potentially even more harmful, however, is this metaphor's clear assumption that writing problems and writing difficulties are outside the domain of the content-area instructor, except as they relate to matters of detection. Content and expression are neatly divided with the difficulties in one area presumably having no effect or influence on mastery of the other. Without question, such an assumption has disastrous consequences for writing centers over time. Research has shown quite clearly that many grammatical and syntactic difficulties arise in student texts because those students are grappling with subject matter. When students have difficulties in understanding what it is they are trying to say, it should come as no surprise that awkward sentences, infelicitous word choices, stilted grammar, and mechanical errors appear in some student essays. The "rehabilitation" aspect of the prison metaphor presumes that each of these problems is a distinct form of error that transcends genre, purpose, or occasion. You show students the error of their ways, and these problems are "supposed to" disappear forever. When, in some later course, students again struggle with unfamiliar content, and these errors resurface, then instructors will blame

the writing center for releasing or certifying the student as competent before such was actually the case. I like to think of this as the Willie Horton view of writing centers: "In 1990, they released convicted run-on writer George Smith. In 1991, he wrote a run-on again. Are these the sort of people we want teaching our kids?"

The Writing Center as Hospital

The second story I told, about the student who was referred to the writing center because his paper was "pretty bad," seems representative of the view that the center is like a hospital. Pieces of written text reveal patterns of illness, the symptoms of linguistic disease, not unlike smallpox or measles which break out in visible marks on a patient's skin. Frequently, the instructor takes on the role of country doctor or lay practitioner, treating the symptoms with a healthy dose of grammar exercises from a convenient handbook. More often, however, and especially in cases where the spread of disease seems advanced or particularly severe, the instructor sees the need for a specialist—the expert in the writing center. Because of our expertise, the metaphor maintains, we are better able to diagnose the specific nature of the problem evidenced in a piece of text, and we will also have the resources and knowledge available to effect a cure.

On the surface, the perception of the writing center as hospital is a more benign metaphor than that of the prison. Hospitals are places of compassion and healing, not incarceration and punishment. Hospitals are also places where intelligent professionals work in the service of mankind. Doctors are widely respected and admired for their knowledge and skills. We who work as tutors in writing centers would like to be similarly respected and admired by our peers. It's hard not to look favorably upon a metaphor that places us in such a role. But what we need to realize is that this metaphor also carries with it a number of misunderstandings about the nature of writing problems, and the consequences it has for both students and tutors in the long term can be quite harmful.

If we (or instructors or students) begin to conceive of writing problems as illnesses, then we are faced with a number of expectations about how we should address these problems and how they should respond to intervention and treatment. People who employ the hospital

metaphor as a framework for understanding will often see tutors as diagnosticians and pharmacists. We are supposed to look at the symptoms, diagnose the illness, and prescribe a medicine that will effect a cure. It is as if we could say, "Ahhh...you have misplaced conjunctionitis. Take these exercises, drink plenty of language, and call me in the morning." As we all know, however, writing skills are not learned or corrected overnight; there is some question about whether they can be assimilated even over the span of several semesters. What, then, are instructors to make of a student who goes to the writing center for "treatment" but who continues to evince the same symptoms of illness in his or her next paper? Well, if they're generous to us, they'll blame the student for having a chronic, long-term, debilitating linguistic illness; if they're not so generous, they'll think of us as a bunch of quacks. In effect, then, the hospital metaphor is not so different in its implications for us and our responsibilities from the prison metaphor. Our responsibility is to "make things better," to improve the language behaviors of our charges, and to do so quickly in a way that ensures that their deviant behaviors—whether seen as "illnesses" or "crimes"—do not reappear.

Yet this perception of our responsibility (and of our abilities), as with the view of writing center as prison, is where the metaphor breaks down and, inevitably, does us harm. Most writing problems are deeply ingrained and quite complex; they are resolved gradually, over time, often over a period of years. They do not lend themselves to quick cures or simple panaceas. Further, as I indicated earlier, certain kinds of writing problems and infelicities will appear sporadically and inconsistently, in response to different genres, tasks, constraints, responsibilities, and situations. Their appearance is not evidence of illness as much as it is of an ongoing struggle to accommodate developing thoughts into the varying conventions of written prose. As I look back on the first draft of this very article, I find sentences that are embarrassingly awkward, lengthy, and convoluted. This is not a sign of illness or slow, tortuous recovery; it is a sign of DIScovery, of the struggle to find and generate and express meaning in a world of possibilities.

The Writing Center as Madhouse

The third incident with the irate instructor—strikingly similar to a scenario described

by Olson (156)—is representative of the view that the writing center is a kind of mental institution for the linguistically insane, a dumping ground for those who are truly beyond help. There are no expected rehabilitations or cures available here; the best that can be hoped for is the achievement of some sort of functional competence. The students who come to the writing center under the auspices of this particular metaphor are looked upon as the fallen and the hopeless. They are frequently asked to drop classes because of their poorly developed writing skills, they are often told they can't meet the expectations of the high school or the college or the university, and they are just as often informed that the teachers just don't have the time to give them the attention they need. Writing and written products are used as verbal Rorschach Tests, indicators of mental states and abilities. When these students are told they can't write, the madhouse metaphor therefore assumes that they can't think either.

All of the roles implied by this metaphor are depressing, and all of the consequences are harmful. In some ways, in fact, the writing center as madhouse metaphor incorporates the worst aspects of both the prison AND the hospital metaphors. A madhouse is, after all, a place where one incarcerates the mentally ill. Instructors, like bereaved and concerned family members, commit students to the writing center because they convince themselves that's what's "best" for everyone involved. They may do so out of kindness, out of frustration, out of anger, out of disgust—but mostly they do so to get the student out of their hair; they just don't want to have to deal with the problem anymore. Motivations are mixed—the instructors may take the Pontius Pilate approach, wanting merely to wash their hands of the problem, or they may genuinely wish to help the student but will be at a complete loss to know how.

The students who see the Center as a kind of mental institution will frequently believe that they are beyond hope—they *must* be, since their instructors seem to think so and, after all, aren't they supposed to know about such things? In many cases, these students have been told their language skills are deficient for most of their lives; many of them—minority students especially (and I should perhaps mention at this point that the student in my anecdote was a young black woman)—have had to deal with this kind of degradation in addition

to all the other cultural and social cues that tell them they are second class citizens. Their responses are quite natural ones: either a subconscious acceptance of the belief that they are somehow inferior, or an angry rebellion against anyone or anything which serves as a reminder of their abandonment by the dominant social or linguistic class. In the first case, the students won't believe anything will help, and in the second case the students won't let anything help. The hurt, resentment, and anger students feel is directed toward the tutor, resulting in tearful, emotional breakdowns on the one hand, sullen silences on the other.

The tutor, in such situations, is forced out of the role of tutor or instructor or facilitator and into the role of psychological counselor. As much time must be given in tutorial sessions to rebuilding self-esteem and establishing trust as to talking about writing. This is not necessarily a bad thing; to some extent, whenever we deal with student insecurities about their writing, we are being counselors or motivators. But when we need to help students who have been told in no uncertain terms that they are rhetorical—and therefore intellectual and social—misfits, we are being asked to deal with situations that are at odds with our very mission and teaching philosophy.

First of all, the students who are consigned to us under this metaphor rarely have any sort of thinking problems at all. The student in the anecdote I related earlier suffered only from a misunderstanding of the requirements of the assignment—a fault that could probably be placed on the shoulders of the instructor as well as the student. As Mike Rose has shown us in his book, *Lives on the Boundary*, as Ira Shor has shown us in *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, and as Mina Shaughnessey has shown us in *Errors and Expectations*, the students we identify as remedial, basic writers, linguistically underprepared, or functionally literate are often capable of much more than we give them credit for. They need practice, true; they need instruction in the conventions of Standard American English, true; they need encouragement to accept challenges and test their developing language skills, true; but more than anything else, they need recognition for what they are already capable of doing. The focus on products, grammatical and mechanical correctness, and low-level problems which are used as the basis for evaluation and, ultimately, commitment to the writing center is

a point of view which research has consistently shown to be counterproductive, to say the least (Hillocks).

The true danger which underlies all structural metaphors such as the ones I have talked about here is that the longer they exist, the more firmly entrenched they will become. Lakoff and Johnson say that "Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies" (156). What we need to do is to change these dominant metaphors. One way to accomplish this would be to replace harmful metaphors with more benign or productive ones. Representing the writing center as a "workshop" or a "studio" would have similar beneficial effects, suggesting the "craftlike" nature of the writing enterprise and the impression that the "products" of writing are in a continual state of flux and development. Workshops and studios are also gathering places for many creators, a place where they can see what others are working on and help others with their creations. An even more productive and natural metaphor would be to represent the writing center as a "center." This would enhance its image as a gathering place for people and information. Its resonance with terms like "community center" would indicate a place where people meet, collaborate, and resolve issues that are of interest to a wide spectrum of people.

More than anything else, we need to educate students and instructors about what writing centers really are and what they are capable of doing. Instructors must become familiar with what goes on in writing centers; they need to see how the centers are organized, what tutors try to accomplish, and what is possible to achieve in the span of an hour or half-hour conference. We need to educate them especially about what writing centers are not: there are no quick cures to be found there, no washing of hands, no problems that magically disappear forever. They are not prisons, not hospitals, not mental institutions. What they are, are resource centers and places where writers can work collaboratively on their texts. We can help promote the mission of writing centers by directly confronting the metaphors they employ and deconstructing

them, as it were. By replacing the abstract metaphorical conceptions which instructors, or students, or even tutors may hold with concrete descriptions (or even hands-on experience) of writing centers, we might improve our reflected image in the minds of instructors and students. Instead of seeing the writing center as a prison, a hospital, or a madhouse, instructors and students would begin to see the writing center as a writing center, and isn't that, after all, the best sort of representation we could hope for?

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