

The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

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

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....from the editor....

This last issue of the season is a classic case of "this-is-the-best-of-times; this-is-the-worst-of-times." The lead article by Michael Spooner, senior NCTE editor, is a particularly exciting invitation to think about our burgeoning world of knowledge-making and all the writing center books that need to be written. However, the next two companion articles (one printed across the top half of each page and the other in a shaded box on the bottom) are less invigorating. Steve Sherwood offers us stories of writing labs being cut back or dissolved as well as suggestions for to how to cope in these perilous budget-crunching times. Katya Amato tells us about the fallout in her writing center of Oregon's financial problems. Steve Sherwood ends with Rick Leahy's observation that we somehow manage to cope with practically no budget, but Katya Amato cautions that if we keep building bricks without straw, we are in danger of getting no straw at all.

Surely, this is all more than enough to think about during the long summer ahead, but I also wish all of us a luxuriously quiet, restful vacation. Until next fall, take care.

• Muriel Harris, editor

....inside....

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**Circles and Centers:
Some Thoughts on
the Writing Center
and Academic
Book Publishing**

Let me start with a caveat about the role of a book publisher. Publishing is a profession in its own right, of course, with its own scholars and practitioners and bodies of knowledge and folklore. Among other things, a publisher tries to know something of what is in demand in a field, as well as what is considered important. A publisher needs to watch for what sells, that is, and to whom. It can be interesting to look at things from that angle, but I think you'd agree that you don't really want to know what a publisher thinks the field of writing center scholarship ought to be producing. It's supposed to work the other way round: the scholars are supposed to set the agenda for the publishers.

And in the main, that's the way it does work. Publishers try above all to be receptive to the field, watching for opportunities to publish work in the areas identified by the scholars as important for one reason or another, or iden-

tified by a given readership as appealing for one reason or another. With the understanding, then, that my agenda is not to set your agenda but to bring it to a reading public, I think we have plenty to say to each other. My assignment is to say something about future needs in books from and about the writing center. I'm going to take this as a question of my perspective on the match between what you folks want to write and what your audience wants to read. I think I can do this usefully by offering a few thoughts about the character of the audience we're trying to reach with books on the writing center—how broad that audience is and what kind of books seem to do well with it.

At first, I thought I would start with an image of publishing about the writing center as a set of concentric circles—three circles, at least—representing potential audiences. Appropriately in the center would be a circle for “pure” writing center topics, appealing primarily to those who administer, study, or work in the writing center; in the next larger circle would be the audience of the wider field of composition studies; the next larger circle would include at least the rest of the world known as English Studies; and so on. The point of this image would be that writing center books can reach a wider audience as they move outward conceptually, addressing concerns that writing centers share with others in the world of writing studies and the broader academic world.

But then I realized that if the circles are concentric, I'm implying that what is most interesting to the middle circle is already of interest to the circles that encompass it. Not only of interest, but even, well, “central” to them. Sadly, this isn't the case. So I thought what I needed was an image of overlapping circles, not concentric ones. In this picture, I could make a big circle for the world of general scholarly publishing, and overlap it with smaller circles—not encompassed—for English studies, composition studies, etc. And finally (symbolizing maybe too much about marginality), I would put a smallish circle off to one side, overlapping with as many of the others as possible, but still showing a good deal of un-shared area: the writing center. This way, I was thinking, I could represent the uniqueness of the writing center's domain and interests compared with those of broader audiences. And maybe also make a point that we might be tempted to overlook in a setting like this one: that the audience for “pure” writing center books is a specialized

audience, not a general one. More pointedly, writing center books are not really in the center of demand, even among academic audiences—no huge reading public in the first place. (But then, good grief, you can't say that kind of stuff; it's depressing. You're saying the center is not the writing center, the writing center cannot hold, we turn in someone else's orbit.) Eventually, I gave up on graphics altogether, but I continue to think that what I need to say involves these two elements:

- 1) The audience for “pure” writing center books is a small one. Of course, they still need to be done, and someone certainly should write them. But publishers, since part of their job is to stay in business, will need to be stingy with these books, will need to be sure that these are the Really Important Books. Right now, this probably means research or theoretical works that contribute to an expanding/expansive vision of the center's role in the academy. But it might also include works that address crucial practical concerns unique to the writing center—administrative concerns of establishing a center, for example: money, staff, equipment, politics, and so on.
- 2) Given a stingy market for “pure” writing center books, then the way to reach a

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wider audience—and still do a writing center book—is to address issues that the writing center shares with those outside the writing center.

Speaking as an outsider, one thing I admire about writing centers is how broad their range of service is. That any single unit of administration could serve clients as diverse as ESL writer, WAC writers, basic writers, continuing ed writers, as well as run-of-the-mill undergrad writers, that they could offer face-to-face tutoring, on-line support, research opportunities, teaching opportunities, faculty workshops, and all the other services represented is astonishing. And if it's this range of service that makes you valuable to your particular academy, it is the same breadth of expertise that underlies your potential in publishing. The writing center, it seems to me, is a hothouse of knowledge-making, and I take it for granted that the future will see ever more useful constructions there.

If I were encouraging folks to start book projects from their work in the center, I would first of all mention topics that other domains of compositions studies are also eager to discuss. I would mention practical issues like training tutors and TAs in composition. This is a broad-gauged, ongoing concern to the center and to the wider composition community alike, and it takes us into all the obvious areas of tutor roles, conferencing, response, student diversity, evaluation of student and teacher, even the whole peer tutoring movement. There are quite a few books here yet to be written.

I would mention topics like multiculturalism and writing. Real multiculturalism, I mean: what do those who teach writing in the center need to understand about the way non-Anglo cultures write and think? What can the field of writing studies learn from the discourse styles of international students? What can the center teach other disciplines about non-Anglo student in WAC situations? It seems to me that the writing center is uniquely situated not only to interpret the American academy to the trans-cultural student (or to the non-Anglo American student), but also to interpret that student to the American academy.

I would also mention topics like writing in electronic environments. As you know, there is a host of issues in this area that the rest of the composition studies world is just beginning to

discuss, even as the writing center world is just beginning to discuss them. Issues of rhetoric, of response, of collaboration and how they are affected in the online environment—to raise just three—that writing center folks deal with every day.

Even more obvious, perhaps, the problems of creating software deserve more attention (whose pedagogy, whose ideology will inscribe it?), the questions of access to hardware, software, networks, and technical support deserve more attention. (Publishers, by the way, are eager to look at ideas for publications in electronic form these days, too. You may know that John Boe included a very interesting bit of hyper-fiction in the Spring 1991 [Vol. 2, No. 2] issue of *Writing on the Edge* a year or so ago. Other publishers are interested in such things, too: multimedia products, database products like bibliographies, instructional software for the individual and the network.)

I have said, roughly speaking, that where we want to focus on the writing center itself in book publishing (as opposed to seeking a wider readership), we should aim for the Important Book of theory or research. No one here thinks it implausible at all to suggest that within the next few years we'll begin to see many such books coming out of the writing center community. Even folks like me, who lurk along the margins of the academy, can see that there are ambitious visions forming these days. In this formative—or re-formative—time, I think we'll see works clarifying a picture of the writing center with a literacy mission that is at once integrative, eclectic, and restless. I assume we'll see discussions of writing center pedagogy that set it increasingly in the avant garde of composition studies. I trust we'll see descriptions of what one could call a "virtual center," as the online experiments going on now succeed and develop. And if people like David Russell are right, we may even see efforts to restructure the entire project of undergraduate writing as a vast WAC-oriented program, of which the writing center—not the English Department—is the hub.

I don't mean to pretend that not much is going on elsewhere, but it's my publisher's hunch that some of the books written during this formative period in the writing center will turn out to be true landmarks as the field of composition instruction finds its way into the 21st century.

(cont. on page 10)

How to Survive the Hard Times

Jim McDonald came home from the Conference on College Composition and Communication this year to discover his writing center will lose half of its tutoring staff next fall. In response to a 40 percent statewide budget cut, the University of Southwestern Louisiana's administration decided to hire no new teaching assistants at the masters level. And since TAs make up more than half of the staff at Southwestern Louisiana's writing center, the cut will hit the center especially hard. "I don't know whether the administration will look to cut the money I have to hire students by the hour, which would in effect close the Writing Center," McDonald writes in an April 7 e-mail WCenter message. He adds, "I knew I should have stayed in San Diego."

Others probably share McDonald's feelings. At California State, Chico, for instance, the provost recently cut all funding to the university's writing center. The center's director appealed over electronic mail for letters of support from writing centers around the country. The letters came in, and reportedly boosted morale, but sources say a passionate

defense by the English Department chair most likely spared the center from immediate closure. The director now has three years to find an alternate method of funding her operation.

Obviously writing centers are in trouble. Times are hard, and as money runs short administrators looking for programs to cut often see writing centers, which frequently generate no FTEs (the full-time equivalents on which states base university funding) as disposable. As Ray Wallace, author of *The Writing Center: New Directions*, says, "We are perceived as important units until money is a problem. Then we're caught in limbo." Oregon is suffering perhaps the worst crisis, with centers at Portland State and Eastern Oregon State in jeopardy (see below, a related article by Katya Amato about Portland State's situation), but as the above cases illustrate, the funding crunch is widespread. If we operate on the theory that what hurts one writing center hurts them all, it follows that even those among us who feel secure ought to be worrying about our rather vulnerable profession. After all, epidemic budget cuts may not only impact specific

Making Bricks Without Straw: The Fate of One Writing Center

Our writing center did everything right. Four teaching assistants and a handful of volunteers tutored 1,500 hours a year. I tutored 500 hours a year in addition to a half-time teaching load. At three tables and two desks in a 12x24 room, we tutored everyone who wanted help with writing: native and non-native speakers, freshmen through seniors, graduate students, professors, alumni, aspiring fiction writers in the community, and local businesses. Although we advertised only five times a term in the student newspaper, we were popular, especially among international students: during walk-in hours, students from all the Asian dragons lined up outside our door. We were a dedicated band, tutoring in the rain when a bomb threat emptied the building. Our excellent reputation earned support from our department head, professors, the dean, the provost, and the faculty senate. And we were

cheap—one half-time instructor, four teaching assistants, one half-time clerical assistant, a work-study student for twenty hours, and under five hundred dollars a year for supplies, books, and advertising.

Energized by our success, I expanded the center's services. I ran writing workshops for teachers in other departments, an informal employment service matching tutors and clients, and a writing hot line to serve the community. I had just written a successful computer grant, was drafting a university-wide newsletter, and had been unanimously put forward by my department for tenure as a senior instructor when a statewide tax limitation measure cut every program throughout the state educational system.

Nothing happened immediately. Rumors

centers but end a twenty-year boom in our field—and the accompanying spread of our collaborative learning philosophy. The fate of a center like Portland State's, which has already lost its funding and relies on volunteer tutors, rests more in the hands of the Oregon legislature than those of its director. Even so, most of us can make it through the hard times if we act before budget cuts threaten. Although situations differ, Wallace and others say we will boost our chances of survival if we do some of the following:

- Justify our cost effectiveness
- Practice self-promotion
- Avoid becoming marginalized
- Ally ourselves with other learning centers
- Move our centers out of the English department.

One of the first steps we should take to safeguard our writing centers is to think like those who control the money, Jenna Wright says. She is co-coordinator of the writing center at University of Tennessee at Martin. "We have to present ourselves well, defend ourselves as a cost-justified support service," she adds, "because when cuts come, we may be the first place they look." Wright speaks from experience. In fall 1991, Tennessee lawmakers ordered the university to cut 13 percent from

its base budget. "The whole university was facing a severe situation, so we weren't singled out," she says. "A lot of other programs were cut. Like most writing centers, we don't generate FTEs. The administration didn't want to cut classes and faculty. That's why they looked at us."

For two weeks, the writing center closed its doors. Fortunately, over the years, Wright and her co-coordinator kept careful records of their services, including computer hours, client visits (4,000 a year from a student population of 5,800), and workshops offered (e.g., roundtable discussions on Edgar Allan Poe and on Tennessee writers). "We were able to show we'd been doing a good job," Wright says. What proved crucial, though, was the support of students and faculty, who rallied to the center's defense. "They were the ones who documented our effectiveness, who confirmed we were a good return on the investment—a positive force in recruitment and retainment."

The University of Tennessee restored its writing center's funding to 50 percent for that semester and 100 percent for the next, Wright says. "We're going full force now, thanks to the faculty, administration, and students. If the center is effective and the campus says it is, you have a better chance of avoiding the cuts."

flew, committees proliferated, budget hearings were held weekly. A few arts and health programs were cut, but the English Department was thin to begin with, so we did not expect cuts. I thought the writing center was safe because it was popular and cheap—not to mention essential for academic support in a working-class university. I expected the relatively fat downstate land-grant universities would be put on a diet, not Portland State, the perennially underfunded stepchild of the state system. Founded after World War II for veterans in the largest city in the state, Portland State serves mostly first-generation college students—adults with jobs and families who at a median age of twenty-eight cannot relocate to the pleasant greenery downstate.

But we were not safe. The contract cleaning people now collect garbage twice a week and wax the floors once a year. Few clerks are left to help students with financial aid or graduation questions. Tenured professors are safe for now although they are encouraged to retire early; by

state fiat, they will become more "productive" (in my department they already teach three classes a term). Instructors, who teach four classes a term, will be replaced by lecturers, who will earn less and have no benefits. The number of teaching assistants will be cut by more than half. Some instructors have already lost sections, including one part-timer who shot himself last week. His being a Vietnam vet with an alcohol problem probably had more to do with his suicide than did the loss of sections, but in this depressed atmosphere we see painful objective correlatives everywhere.

In the writing center, I lost all but one of my teaching assistants for fall and winter terms. I regained two for spring term because of low enrollment in freshman composition sections. I am still here but probably not for long; tenure is out of the question, unemployment likely. I have no budget for supplies, just a smidgen the department can spare for pencils and pads. I buy books out of my salary.

Wallace agrees with this assessment. If his center were in danger of being cut in the near future, he says, "First, I'd get all my figures together. Then, I'd get letters of support from outside the English department. Next, I'd get letters of support from inside the English department. Finally, I'd make sure to bring the academic vice president, or whoever was responsible for making the cut, in to see the center when it's real busy."

In the long haul, beyond demonstrating the center's overall effectiveness and mustering support, Wallace says we ought to promote ourselves better. "We're not too good about tooting our own horns, and that kills us. Too many of us don't view what we do as a profession. We view it as—what's the word?—an avocation: something nonmaterial, almost mystical. We must show ourselves and others that what we're doing is important and defensible. When you get back from delivering a paper, do you make sure to mention the presentation in the campus newsletter? That promotes your visibility, shows the campus you're doing something for real."

Another benefit of professional activity is that it can carry writing center people from the fringe to the mainstream. Janice Neuleib, director of Illinois State University's Center for Learning Assistance, says, "I can't say enough

how important it is for a center's director not to get marginalized. What they—the administration—think is important is publications. I've always operated under the assumption that the center would be as safe as I was. So I've made an effort to be sure I was exceedingly respectable in the English department and in the profession, through publications, presentations, and staying on the cutting edge of thought in composition and literature."

Like Oregon and Louisiana, Illinois is making deep cuts in its education budget. "We used to be so well funded, and now we're not," Neuleib says. "The budget cuts are really something. The College of Continuing Education was cut in early March if that gives you any idea."

Although her staff of tutors has been reduced from 115 to 80, Neuleib feels sure her center will survive. One reason for this—which also helps prevent the center itself from becoming peripheral—is its broad base. Illinois State created the Center for Learning Assistance in 1986 by wedding its ten-year-old writing center with an even older reading center. "We put all the resources together, and added a quite extensive writing assessment program," Neuleib says. "We also do athletic tutoring, content tutoring, and a supplemental instruction program for general education courses. Our

The worst is the uncertainty, which emanates from the governor's office and the state legislature and drifts down to the least of us. No one seems to know anything. Administrators shake their heads when asked who will survive the next round of cuts. The university is adopting writing across the curriculum and will probably cut composition classes, thus saving even lecturers' salaries. One would think a strong writing center a requirement to support writing across the curriculum, but no official commitment to the center has been made.

I cannot say whether we will survive next year or in what form. Here is how we made it through this year.

First we talked and got some anger out, and then we grieved, openly mourning what was happening and what might happen. Then we freewrote, not only to plan our response to the budget cuts but also to remember other jobs we'd

had and liked, reminding ourselves that there was life beyond the writing center. We each started stress reduction programs—acupuncture, exercise, meditation—while fine-tuning our vitae. At the time I worried that we were wasting some tutoring hours, but in retrospect I know we had to do these things in order to pull up our socks and carry on.

Then I cut our hours and began looking for private grants to cover payroll (I'm still looking). I recruited volunteer tutors, especially from among graduate students denied assistantships in our shrinking graduate program. The department head and the director of writing also volunteered in what turned out to be mostly symbolic gestures, but morale depends on symbolism, and I appreciated their trying to help us despite their other budget crises. With their cooperation, I was able to offer academic credit for tutoring by requiring a journal from undergraduates and an annotated bibliography from graduates.

center is massively involved and intricate.”

Fusion with other centers of learning may not appeal to everyone. Wright speaks for many in the field when she says, “For me, turning the writing center into a study skills center and allying with reading and math centers is not a desired possibility.” Whether we like it or not, though, budget concerns may eventually make this approach the rule. As Wallace says, “If writing centers can wrap themselves into stronger units by linking with other study centers, they can create a more defensible position. The more people individual tutoring can reach, the more secure we’ll be.”

At Illinois State, the idea of putting various academic support units under one roof came from the administration, and Neuleib admits she had misgivings about its impact on the reputation of her writing center. But as it turned out, she says, “Financially the move into the learning center was a boost. Everything is more cost effective. If a person is having problems with writing and is taking a general education course, we can coordinate tutoring.” She adds, “It has enhanced our survivability.”

For writing centers that have not already done so, another way to ensure survival is to seek economic shelter away from the English

department. While most writing center directors maintain their connection with English—often as tenured professors—Wallace advises each of us to “get yourself out of the English department and under the vice president for academic affairs, then make sure the vice president sees the writing center as his or her baby.” As Wallace suggests, “We really have to answer a question about what the writing center is politically. A lot are still part of the English department. As long as they are, they’re subject to cuts.”

This may be due in part to the hierarchical nature of English departments themselves, where literature people often look down on composition people, and both look down on writing center people. In such an environment, the writing center often a relative newcomer—is in a weak position to compete for already scarce funds. Meanwhile, if the campus sees the writing center as a vehicle of the English department, students in other disciplines may not seek advice there. When budget cuts threaten such a center, experts say, the campus often has little reason to rally to its defense.

Illinois State’s Center for Learning Assistance is under the vice president in charge of minority affairs, which gives the center high visibility, Neuleib says. “Our broad base and

To encourage and retain volunteers, I let our weekly training sessions become rather elaborate potlucks in a relaxed and warm atmosphere. Training became entirely informal: an interview, a chat about priorities and goals, a tour of our resources, a small packet of information, and a handshake introduction to our experienced tutors. We fuss less about paperwork, but I can still tell an administrator (should one ask) how many students we serve and what classes they are enrolled in.

Running a volunteer center with twenty-five points of light has meant more work: the sheer logistics of handling so many new people tutoring for a few hours a week, the turnover, a schedule that won’t stay pinned down, and the drudgery of writing dozens of recommendations. But I hear the right questions and comments when I walk past the tutoring tables. We’re doing a fine job and receiving kudos from everyone. Maybe the

king’s messenger will arrive in fall term to save us.

But sometimes I wonder whether we should hold on, whether we should cooperate in our own exploitation. I know why we do it—our damned social consciences, our respect and affection for students, and our optimism as we cultivate our own little Candidean gardens—but making do cannot enhance our professional standing and can ultimately cost all of us our jobs, can wipe out our field. I see a trend here, having heard people speak at conferences about students replacing teachers in writing classes. It is past time for us to examine this issue in more detail. If we can make bricks without straw, then why should the administration give us any straw at all?

Katya Amato
Portland State University
Portland, OR

heavy minorities emphasis have helped." At Texas Christian University the writing center comes under the authority of the associate vice chancellor for academic affairs. This gives the center a budget line separate from the English department's and, since the entire university has an investment in the center, broadens its client base to include all disciplines.

The strategy of shifting the writing center out of the English department has worked well for Eric Hobson, assistant professor and director of the Southwest Missouri State University Writing Center. "Under the previous director, the center was department-based," Hobson says. "I moved it under the vice president for academic affairs—on neutral turf—so it wouldn't be perceived as serving one particular group."

Perhaps as a result, his campus-wide center served more students in its first semester than the old center served in the past year. Meanwhile, Hobson has asked for budget increase from \$8,500 to \$79,000 a year, "and it looks like it will be approved," he says. "It will mean a pay raise for my writing consultants, and some graduate students will get assistantships through the writing center."

So what if we've justified our cost effectiveness, practiced self-promotion, moved into the mainstream through professional activities, fused with other learning centers, and gotten out of the English department, but still find ourselves one step away from oblivion? Closure may be inevitable for some centers, regardless of the fine work they do, if their universities simply lack the funds to keep them open. As Wright observes, "Philosophically, I'd say that any time there are budget cuts, writing centers are more vulnerable than units that generate FTEs."

Still, Ray Wallace offers one more survival tip that may not work for everyone, but which does address the FTE problem. "We don't want to talk about remediation because we do so much more," he says, "but if this will save our butts, why not talk about it? If we run developmental classes through the writing center, we bring FTEs and credit hours into the university. This way we get classes taught, but as one-on-one tutorials, so in some ways we get the best of both worlds."

Whatever our individual circumstances,

even if we're secure for the moment, we can't afford to be complacent. As Wallace suggests, to survive we must stay alert to the changing needs of our universities and evolve to meet them. Meanwhile, for those of us who, for instance, come home from the Conference on College Composition and Communication to find our budgets cut in half, some hope for survival, however tenuous, lies in continuing to be resolute. As Richard Leahy says, "Writing center people are tenacious. If they have to, they'll try to provide service in some way on practically no budget at all."

Steve Sherwood
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A New Resource for Writers of Creative Resumes

If students coming to your writing lab want a "creative edge" in writing their resumes, consider a new book for your resource library, *The Edge Resume and Job Search Strategy* by Bill Corbin and Shelbi Wright (\$23.95). This 172-page book has information on writing resumes and cover letters as well as thirty sample resumes to browse through. There are also tips on interviewing and follow-up techniques. What makes this book unique, besides some helpful advice and honest acknowledgement about how hard it is to get those resumes noticed, are the creative resumes printed on paper with interesting designs, colors, cut outs, and graphics. Resume writers interested in using any of these particular "creative" papers can purchase the paper from the publisher. A growing number of colleges and universities are also making this stock of paper available for purchase on campus.

For further information, contact the publisher:

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Tutors' Column

Angel and the Devil's Advocate

Cheryl. There she was in the doorway: my 7:30 appointment. I rechecked what I knew about her in my mind: freshman, taking English 101, first time in The Writing Center. She carried a binder in one hand, two pens in the other. Preparation was a good sign.

"Cheryl?" I asked. Her face lit up. Immediately I felt less tense. She seemed so friendly and sweet. This might not be so hard after all. I smiled back, introduced myself, and suggested a quiet table. She followed me obligingly.

As we sat down, I asked her what she wanted to talk about. She pulled a messy rough draft out of her binder and offered it to me. It was a Sociology 101 paper, she explained. She was sure she had enough material in her essay, but was concerned that she had not organized her thoughts well. We smiled at each other some more. By now I was feeling relaxed, despite my lack of tutoring experience. Organization? A piece of cake.

I read her first few sentences: not brilliant, but solid. She had obviously memorized some academic essay structure. I read on with growing alarm; no professor could fault her format... but her opinions!

I furtively glanced at Cheryl out of the corner of my eye. Was this a joke? Some sort of bizarre tutor initiation rite? No, she was watching me patiently, eager to hear my words of wisdom. I skimmed the text furiously, searching for a point I could agree with, or at least respect. There were none.

What was I supposed to do? Cheryl was right, her organization was nonexistent, but what would be the point of straightening and polishing such a fragile argument? Too much tampering might bring her paper crashing down! "So, what you're saying is that teenagers who listen to Heavy Metal music will become suicidal?" I held my breath, hoping I had misinterpreted what she was trying to say.

Cheryl was beaming, nodding assent, so happy that I had grasped her thesis. I smiled at her yet again, and started praying for a natural disaster to save me.

It was a moral dilemma. A student had entrusted her work to me, so I could help her make it better. I was a writing tutor; was I expected to better her ideas? Was I allowed to try? Could I live with myself if I strengthened an argument I found not only silly, but offensive? Don't panic, I told myself. Maybe you can have it both ways. If you gently challenge her points, perhaps she will see the holes in her premise all by herself, and her organization will improve in the process!

Casually I asked, "Are you sure you have enough supporting evidence to uphold your main ideas? Like here, can you prove that all antisocial teens like Metal?" Cheryl looked blank. "I know plenty of antisocial people," I offered, "who don't even listen to Heavy Metal. Also, I know 'metalheads' who are perfectly happy." She thought this over.

"Well," she said slowly, "maybe only specific types of kids who are antisocial already will become suicidal when they listen to Metal." This sounded like a step in the right direction, but I wasn't sure, and time was running out. I really wanted to help reorganize her paper, but I didn't think her thesis could be supported convincingly (and besides that, I grimaced inwardly, I didn't like it). I decided to make one last, blatant attempt to get Cheryl to reconsider or modify her thesis. I said what I'd been choking back.

"Maybe," I ventured, "kids who are suicidal may start to like Heavy Metal because they identify with the depressing lyrics, instead of becoming depressed by listening to the lyrics." I held my breath hopefully while she thought this over.

"I suppose sometimes that happens," she assented.

Close, but no score. I admitted defeat. "Let's check your organization," I said.

Fifteen minutes later, her paragraphs were stronger and clearer. Each new idea was signalled by a transition statement. Her paragraphs flowed. Her time was up. I would have liked to talk about this further. I would have liked another chance to pry her, pry her away from her shallow thesis. But she was stuffing her essay—my nightmare—back into her binder, telling me sincerely how much help I had been. I accepted her thanks, frustrated.

Cheryl glanced at the clock and stood up. "Do you have another appointment waiting?" she asked.

"No." I enthusiastically cried, "I'm free if you want to talk some more." Here was my second chance to save her paper, heck, even her soul, if I had long enough!

"Great," she smiled at me and reopened her binder, "because I've got this other paper due for English 101. It's about how women should be ladies, and not try to act like men."

I bit my tongue and smiled weakly. "Sounds interesting," I said. "Have a seat."

Patti Weaver
Peer Tutor
St. John Fisher College
Rochester, NY

9th Annual Conference on the Teaching of Writing

October 22, 1993
Fall River, MA

"Writing and Knowing"

Keynote speaker: Jaime O'Neill

This conference will focus on how and what we learn through writing. For further information, contact Alan Powers, Bristol Community College, 777 Elsbree Street, Fall River, MA 02720 (508-678-2811, ext. 2282).

Circles and Centers

(cont. from page 3)

So we begin in caution and end in hope. The immediate audience for books on the writing center is a modest one; that much is clear. But the pedagogical concerns that the writing center has in common with wider audiences, along with its potential to influence future configurations of theory in composition, represent important strengths. Again, I think it may be the unique position of the center, by its nature straddling the worlds of theory and praxis, and by natural disposition interpreting each to the other, that is its peculiar gift.

Michael Spooner
Senior Editor
National Council of Teachers of English

Work Cited

Russell, David, "Writing Cannot Be Taught, Only Genres: WAC and the Humanist Myth." Paper presented at the University of Illinois—Urbana-Champaign Center for Writing Studies Lecture Series, Feb. 16, 1993, Urbana, IL.

Calendar for Writing Center Associations (WCAs)

October 1-2: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Louis, MO

Contact: Susan Sanders, Dept. of Humanities, MTU, 1400 Townsend Dr., Houghton, MI 49931 (906-487-2007)

October 14-16: Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association, in Denver, CO

Contact: M. Clare Sweeney, English Department, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287

October 21-23: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Atlanta, GA

Contact: Brenda Thomas, LaGrange College, 601 Broad St., LaGrange, GA 30241

The Collaborative Writing Workshop and the Classroom Tutor

The University of Cincinnati's developmental writing program in University College is supported by a writing center which operates as a drop-in lab for the students in the developmental sequence, English for Effective Communication I, II, and III. We're open for business about 20 hours a week, and our staff consists of regular hourly-wage tutors who have bachelor's degrees in English and, for the most part, a fair amount of experience as writing tutors. The developmental classes themselves meet four days a week for 50-minute periods. Two of the class meetings are "lecture" sessions conducted by the regular faculty instructor of the course. The other two meetings are set up as "lab days" in which the instructor and the assigned tutors from the drop-in lab all meet with the students in a classroom, usually one with tables instead of desks.

The original arrangement for tutors in these classes, and one still followed by many of our faculty, was to use the tutors primarily as traditional tutors, that is, having them advise the students regarding editing and proofreading of drafts, having them keep students "on task" in working on their papers during lab days, and occasionally having them intervene at various points in the writing process when students asked for assistance. In other words, the tutors functioned in the classroom much as they did in the drop-in lab, primarily as a kind of "repair person" to help "fix" mechanical problems which concerned the student writer.

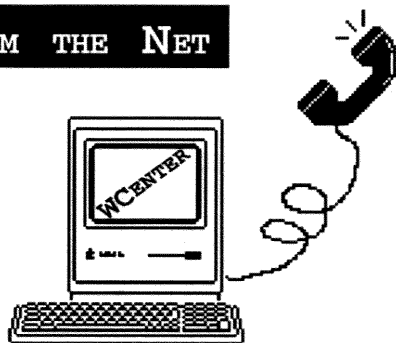
This kind of approach to the use of tutors in our program has generally produced somewhat uneven results. Decisions on how to employ the tutors within the context of the course have traditionally been left to the individual faculty members, all of whom are veteran teachers. Some faculty tend to use the tutors as administrative assistants on lab days by having them check exercises in workbooks, look over worksheets connected to the writing assignment, read and comment on student journal pages, and the like. Others have involved the tutors more directly in the class, but usually in the limited role of consultant regarding specific student problems. Few of the faculty have asked their tutors to take any initiative or active role in the writing instruction of the class.

This has led the tutors, on occasion, to express the concern that they were essentially doing "busy work" intended to keep them out of the instructor's way instead of making an ongoing meaningful contribution to the program or to the student's education. The same feeling also turned up in connection with our drop-in arrangement. Tutors were typically assigned to four hours of on-call duty in the drop-in lab each week, and they frequently noticed a certain hit-or-miss quality to this assignment. Many of the students who came in were not familiar to the tutors, and the students' expectations were usually for some kind of last-minute band-aid response to their work before handing it in. Some tutors also complained that students were not taking much advantage of the drop-in opportunity, and they went so far as to invite students from their own sections to come into the lab informally during the tutor's own drop-in hours for "progress checks" on whatever assignment was currently being undertaken. Again, the tutors felt that their contribution to real writing improvement in the program was not as substantial as it might be.

Given this feedback and the tutors' academic backgrounds, I began to think that perhaps we were not maximizing our resources in our program. In an effort to improve the situation and to more closely integrate the activities of faculty, tutors, and students, both in and out of the classroom, I decided to introduce workshop groups to a number of classes. In the arrangement I devised, students are assigned to a workshop sub-group at the start of the course, with the faculty member and the two tutors each taking approximately one-third of the class. Each group consists of five to six students and a leader, either faculty member or one of the two tutors. For the writing process, then, the students work together at each step along the way, working on invention of ideas in response to a writing assignments, planning, writing drafts, revising, and editing the papers. Tutors not only serve as group leaders, but also make themselves available to their own students for additional tutoring in the drop-in lab during scheduled times throughout the week. Students are encouraged, and in some cases

(cont. on page 14)

VOICES FROM THE NET



---ERIC CRUMP

The Causes and Consequences of Writing Center Dependency

Sometimes what starts out as a discussion of an apparently anomalous situation can spread out like butter on a hot sidewalk until it finds a broader context (or becomes a mess). In this month's excerpts from WCenter* a specific situation leads to a discussion that may have relevance to all writing center specialists.

A few weeks before this conversation began, Paula Gillespie posted a note describing a case in which a student had threatened a tutor, certainly not an everyday event in most writing centers. Here, she returns with a report on the status of that situation and the discussion turns to what might cause such incidents and how writing center people can apprehend the possibility of difficult situations before they occur.

From: Paula Gillespie, Sun, 28 Mar

A few weeks ago I asked if anyone else had ever experienced threatening behavior from students who use the writing center. The student who threatened our tutor was not expelled . . . but has signed a behavioral contract with the university promising never to threaten anyone again Meanwhile, because he is an enrolled student, we must provide him with our services, should he request them.

Here is my question: do any of you have guidelines, posted or not, which specify under which circumstances students might forfeit writing center services?

From: Jane Nelson, Mon, 29 Mar

On abusive students in the writing center: they tend to be writing center dependents. Over the years, we have begun to create a profile of writing center dependents so that we can find out who they are much sooner in the process. Conferences with writing center dependents are very tricky. We have occasionally (very occasionally) resorted to banning a person from using the Writing Center. I don't think this violates any policy about free use of a university service.

From: Jane Nelson, Mon, 29 Mar

We get several kinds of dependents. And we have some lengthy discussions about making sure we distinguish between dependents and those who are using the writing center repeatedly for excellent purposes. Here are some profiles:

- 1) The ESL dependent. ESL students on our campus are all international visa students. Most are smart, aggressive, focused students. They know what they want. They know how to manipulate. We have focused a lot of our time in training ourselves to work with ESL writers and are becoming much more successful.
- 2) The disabled dependent. These are tough cases—blind diabetics, MS students, hearing impaired, etc. [. . .] Again, these students tend to be very smart and aggressive
- 3) The very unsure writer, usually nontraditional students. The behavior of these writers is quite the opposite of the ESL dependents or the disabled dependents. They are not aggressive. They do not think of themselves as smart. They need a whole lot of nurturing.

From: Joseph Hart, Tue, 30 Mar

These are our most common type of "dependent." One woman in particular has been here longer than I have—an early-thirties mother of six, just as you described. . . . Nurturing is central—in my view—to the mission of the writing center.

When I was a tutor, these returning "dependents" were the tutees that I developed the closest bond of friendship with. In one case, the "best case scenario," a woman still comes to talk to me about her writing,

even though I'm ostensibly not a tutor any more. When I first met with her she was absolutely not confident with her writing. She's gradually grown into a voice . . . but continued to visit the center anyway.

What are writing center dependents depending on? I depend *absolutely* on my "readers"—friends, professional peers, and other writers who take the time to read my work and comment, ask questions, "tutor" me. Isn't that what we do? Isn't dependence, or perhaps interdependence, sort of like community? Don't we want community?

Not rhetorical questions, but genuine. . . .

From: Jane Nelson, Tue, 30 Mar

Nurturing implies growth, and writing center people are nurturers in that regard. That's why we discuss in our staff meetings the difference between writers who seem to be benefitting from writing center visits and those who have developed a negative dependency on the writing center. [. . .] This doesn't happen often enough, probably, to be very concerned about. But it does happen, and when it does, we usually find ourselves spending some time talking about it because we have been implicated for so long in the dependency (people cannot become writing center dependents, in the negative way I'm talking about, without the writing center itself being involved in the dependency).

From Amanda Corcoran, Tue, 30 Mar

Joseph asks, "Don't we want community?" in the thread of writing center dependents. And I answer, YES, we want community, but doesn't community mean something different from dependence? Doesn't the community work to establish the best relationship and environment for growing and learning? And is that "best" relationship one which fosters dependence?

I don't think so. [. . .] I don't want to forget either that the writing center community is also responsible for teaching student writers to recognize that they themselves hold the ultimate responsibility for their work—and not the writing center community upon which they can so easily become dependent?

Isn't that the difference between de-

pendence and community? And what is the best way to establish that difference in the students' eyes? Perhaps by establishing an active interaction with limited guidance as opposed to all-seeing, all-knowing advice—a role in which dependents are willing and able to place consultants.

From: Leone Scanlon, Tue, 30 Mar

Joseph:

I think you are right to point out that dependence needn't be viewed only in negative terms. Not if it's interdependence. But that implies give and take. The woman you mentioned took part in a conversation about writing. But when someone brings nothing to the conversation over a long period of time, I get worried. Sometimes I worry about whether my methods are closing out conversation. Or I see students—like some of those Jane described—who seem intent only to take. That's when I see a problem.

From: Jack Holcomb, Tue, 30 Mar

I'd like to agree with Amanda, and maybe expand on her point.

Students who become dependent here tend to be those who either 1) get and maintain the wrong idea of what we do, or 2) develop an overattachment to a particular writing consultant.

I guess I'm trying to differentiate between two types of dependence here—the very personal kind of dependence . . . and dependence on the services we provide (intentionally or unintentionally).

Responses to the personal sort of dependence vary, and that's probably good—if a writing consultant decides to become a student's friend, swell, and if she doesn't she can figure out a way to deal with it—**BUT IT'S NOT AN INSTITUTIONAL PROBLEM.** It's personal, and should stay personal.

From: Amanda Corcoran, Tue, 30 Mar

Jack's expansion is exactly the direction in which my writing center philosophy flows. Help the students help themselves instead of building dependency.

I do, however, feel that this dependency problem is an institutional one, but one

that can be fixed on a personal level through education of faculty and of students. Then, when everyone has a hopefully clear(er) picture of where we stand in relation to responsibility for student documents (i.e., students retain all, and I mean ALL, responsibility for their documents), this dependency (of course, this is an ideal world) will be less common.

** WCenter is an electronic discussion forum for students, writing assistants, and writing center directors. It was started in 1991 by Lady Falls Brown (YKFOK2ttacs), director of composition at Texas Tech University, and Ed Sears, then a graduate at Texas Tech. The list is managed by Fred Kemp (YKFOK@ttacs), director of composition at Texas Tech.*

Collaborative Writing Workshop

(cont. from page 11)

required, to come to the lab during their own tutor's drop-in hours.

Over a period of time, we have come to see a number of benefits from making our tutors a part of the course in this way. The students in the class become a collaborative group, forming a bond with the other members of their group and with the tutors. Students receive both individual attention and group support throughout the developmental writing program. They develop a sense of loyalty to their group and concern for the success of its members, leading them to work together for their mutual benefit. They learn from each other as each part of the writing project is discussed with other group members, under the guidance of the tutor, before individual responsibility for their own paper begins. The students also come to appreciate moral support from their group and the security of access to their "own" tutor at specified times outside the classroom. All of these collaborations provide social as well as educational support to writing students whose problems include lack of self-confidence as well as lack of specific writing skills.

The tutors have clearly benefitted as well. For one thing, morale is higher. For another, the tutors become more actively involved in their work, forming bonds with the

students and becoming more committed to their tutoring efforts as they "shepherd" their group members through each assignment and work together with their students to improve writing skills. Tutoring in the lab becomes more focused as tutors usually work with their "own" students, whose writing is already familiar to them, instead of working with a new student whose writing background is not known to the tutor. The tutors also actively collaborate with the faculty members in weekly meetings to review each student's progress and plan strategies for dealing with individual problems in writing. The faculty member and the tutors function as a team, pursuing the same goals for the students. This closer rapport between faculty member and tutors has been reflected in the increasingly positive rating the faculty members have been giving to workshop tutors on their evaluations at the end of each quarter.

Our writing lab itself has also become a livelier place. Students come in more often, they seek out their tutors with more enthusiasm, and they interact with each other outside the classroom. We have an area in the lab where people can sit together around a single table, and it is not unusual for this table to be occupied by a collaborative writing workshop group meeting outside of scheduled class time.

Overall, the approach seems to be working out quite well from a number of different angles. We're hoping to expand our collaborative workshop classes to include more faculty and tutors in the future. We hope that our approach continues to work as well as it has so far.

Rex Easley
University of Cincinnati
Cincinnati, Ohio

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We are delighted to announce that in the future, there will be no charge for reprinting articles from the *Writing Lab Newsletter* for educational purposes. However, reprints should have the appropriate acknowledgement of the source and should contain reference to the specific issue of the newsletter in which the article appeared.

Writing Center Ethics

In my last column, I described how I had been asked by a professor to “name names” and identify the teaching assistants who—according to what we had seen in the writing center—were apparently doing a less-than-adequate job of assigning and responding to student papers in the course he supervised. I also explained why I felt the ethical issues involved in making a decision about what to do were not as simple or as straightforward as they might at first appear. Writing centers have complex, often conflicting responsibilities to groups of people and administrative units that extend far beyond the walls of the center itself. When making decisions, writing center directors must take into consideration what is fair and in the best interests of their home institutions, departmental teaching assistants, center personnel, students, and professors, not just what seems to be in their own self-interest. This is not an easy position to be in, and it almost guarantees that any policy decision writing center directors make, no matter how well-considered or well-intentioned it may be, will not please everybody.

For my own purposes, I felt that I needed to talk the matter over with my tutors before making any kind of decision about how to respond to this professor. Since the tutors were the ones who had raised the issue in the first place—by complaining about the poor assignments they had seen—and since they were probably going to be among those most directly affected by any decision I made, I openly solicited their advice and comments. At one of our regular tutor meetings, I laid out the details of the professor’s request and spelled out my own feelings about it. I said that even though I didn’t think the request was a fair one (particularly because the threat of retribution against the offending TAs was couched within it), I admitted to some uneasiness about letting weak teaching assistants slip through the cracks simply because we didn’t want to feel like we were “ratting” on other people.

As might be expected, nearly all of my tutors were strongly opposed to the idea that information about individual teaching assistants might be passed from the writing center to professors or anyone else. Most of my tutors, teaching assistants themselves, said that they still felt a little nervous when their own students came into the Writers’ Workshop for assistance, knowing that other tutors—their colleagues—were going to see the assignments they gave and the comments they had written on student papers. If they felt that this information was going to be non-confidential, that their performance as instructors was going to be critiqued, evaluated, and reported on by people in the writing center, then there was no way that they or any other teaching assistant they knew of would recommend that their students go there.

Word of our reporting policy, they said, would also spread quite rapidly once it was known, and the results for the writing center would be disastrous: (1) the center’s reputation on campus would decline drastically in the eyes of instructors, and (2) the number of students visiting the center would decline as a result. Any benefit to students that might be gained by identifying weak teaching assistants, therefore, would be lost in the concomitant damage to the writing center’s reputation as a useful, supportive instructional resource that students and instructors might turn to for assistance.

Further, said my tutors, how were we to distinguish between teaching assistants who were willfully writing poor assignments and those who were brand-new graduate students, teaching their first classes, and making novice mistakes? Wouldn’t it do more harm than good to report these TAs to their superiors for “correction”? Weren’t there mechanisms already in place to observe, train, and give guidance to new teaching assistants within departments? If so, why should we take on the responsibility for oversight ourselves?

These were all valid points and questions, and they helped me to resolve some of the complex concerns I had about my responsibilities to diverse groups on campus:

- 1) *To students:* Reporting on teaching assistants and their classroom practices would generate bad will among instructors, and this would be passed on to students. Our ability to help the greatest numbers of students depends on establishing and maintaining good will with faculty at all levels.
- 2) *To tutors:* Evaluating assignments and reporting on instructors puts an unnecessary burden, both practical and psychological, on tutors.
- 3) *To teaching assistants:* What we see of writing assignments and instructor comments in the writing center is decontextualized. We have no way of knowing, with consistency, whether we are seeing a willful disregard of course policies and practices or merely the learning mistakes of a new, struggling teacher.
- 4) *To administrators:* Alternative means of oversight and supervision are already (or

should be) in place within the TAs' home departments. It is the responsibility of course supervisors, not the writing center, to review TA assignments and classroom behavior.

One of my tutors, in passing, reflected that the professor in question may actually believe quite strongly in point #4, feeling that it was his responsibility, not ours, to comment and act upon the performance of his teaching assistants. Asking us to "name names" may have been a subtle way of asking us to butt out. "After all," my tutor said, "there's no better way to get someone to leave you alone than to ask him to do something he doesn't want to do."

Quite possible. The professor has never repeated his request, and I'm perfectly happy—given the decision my tutors and I came to—not to bring up the subject again.

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