WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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

....from the editor....

The phrase under the logo at the top of this page reminds us of the newsletter's purpose— to promote an exchange of voices and ideas among those of us in writing labs. Perhaps this phrase should be revised to note that the medium of this exchange is "hard copy" print, for now we can also interact via our computer screens.

The lead article in this issue of the newsletter focuses on this new world of electronic mail, specifically on the electronic forum WCenter which is now available to us. In future issues we hope to have Eric Crump's occasional reports of WCenter conversations. Ed Sears' instructions for how to join WCenter also appear in this issue, along with Rosemary O'Donoghue's first account of dipping a toe into this initially bewildering— but rewarding— electronic world.

We welcome your comment, responses, and questions on all this— and, of course, any other topic of mutual interest to all of us.

•Muriel Harris, editor

....inside....

Online Community: Writing Centers Join the Network World

*I still spend many of my days
in a room, physically isolated.
My mind, however, is linked
with a worldwide collection of
like-minded (and not so like-
minded) souls: My virtual
community.*
— Howard Rheingold

The romantic image of the lone writer, sequestered in a garret wrestling with a Muse, has been roundly booed lately by composition scholars. Writing cannot thrive in the vacuum of isolation, most agree. Even those who decline to cast the model aside tend, I think, to acknowledge that at some point in most writers' processes there is a need to share writing with someone else, to baptize the young text in the flow of social discourse. Writing centers often are fashioned as the best place for student writers to enter that discourse. But I don't intend to delve into that subject here. Rather, I'd like to start with a different, but related, question: What about writing centers themselves? I suspect that

many directors and their staffs are still laboring heroically, but basically alone, in their efforts to provide the best learning environment for student writers. However, in this age of computer-mediated communication, professional isolation is a solvable problem. Writing centers can chuck themselves right into the river of discourse by obtaining access to Internet.*

To writing center people, many of whom may consider themselves less than proficient in their knowledge of high technology (and it is to those unconnected and apprehensive colleagues that I address this essay), connecting to a computer network may seem a daunting and incomprehensible task. But consider the alternatives. In the April 1991 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Richard Leahy reported what he had learned on an odyssey that took him to writing centers and writing across the curriculum programs at twenty schools. His observations were interesting, but the fact of the journey was as noteworthy, a rare and ambitious bit of traveling, especially when travel money budgets are shrinking for many universities. I imagine few writing center directors could hope to emulate Leahy's journeying, and most were grateful to read about it. A few months earlier, I would have envied Leahy's good fortune at having the opportunity to make the regional rounds, but by the time I read his article, I had stumbled upon academic computer networks and an electronic writing center discussion group. I could travel farther and faster and learn nearly as much without leaving the cozy confines of our writing center. The barriers that separated me from colleagues all across the continent had come down faster than the Berlin Wall.

Leahy acknowledges in his account that a sense of isolation was the reason for undertaking his travels. "The main motive for my sabbatical visits was to do something so I could stop feeling alone" (5). In addition to observing and absorbing the particulars of other centers, he wanted to make connections with colleagues, a desire that is common and strong in most of us, whether we are writing center directors or plumbers. Most people enjoy trading notes and stories, rubbing ideas together (hoping for sparks), and sharing tales of horror and joy. And like Leahy, many of us find that the opportunities for that kind of interaction are too infrequent.

The sense of isolation that propelled Leahy

from writing center to writing center during his sabbatical may be fairly common among writing center specialists and may be taken almost for granted by most of them. It should not be disregarded, however. Isolation can be a slow killer of intellectual energy. I read with interest a short story in a recent issue of *The Missouri Review* that illustrates the importance of community, however distant and tenuously it might be connected. In "The Telegraph Relay Station," by Norman Lavers, the narrator is a traveler who stops at a remote telegraph station to pick up another stage coach. He is entertained by the doting and marginally sane telegraph operator, who tells how he endured a long winter after being abandoned by his partner:

> But nothing could ever drag him
> back here again. Me, I went through
> the rest of that endless winter. . .
> completely alone. All that kept mind
> together was the messages coming in
> for me to transmit onwards, and the
> answers returning. That world of
> ticking sounds under my finger
> became like my family. I became like
> a blind man with only my sense of
> touch and hearing to connect me to
> the outside. But a wonderful sort of
> blind man who could be in all places
> at once, hear everybody talking
> everywhere. (11)

Communication technology today, specifically networked computers, is sophisticated and lightning fast compared to the telegraph, but it still consists of people tapping keys, sending signals over wires, and in the process, engaging in the kind of personal interaction that satisfies the need to participate in a community. I don't mean to overstate the case, implying by the quote from Lavers' story that writing centers are academically "snowbound" and their directors barely hanging on to sanity, but the story indicates by way of an extreme example just how important connections with other people are and how essential technology is in making those connections. Leahy, in a way, was like the telegraph operator, using the highest technology available— in his case, transportation technology— to find and interact with distant members of his professional "family."

But the community of writing center specialists no longer must depend on the expensive motorized transportation Leahy must have used as the thread that holds it together. A growing world-wide web of computer-mediated communication has created new opportunities to learn from each other in a relatively inexpensive interactive environment. One group of writing center specialists has taken advantage of computer technology to build a thriving community, and I think it is important for everyone in the field to seek access to the networks that help make such communities possible.

Being part of a community is important to us, but making satisfactory links to other members of a community is not necessarily an easy goal to realize. Most of you reading these words presumably find that the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and other publications serve as good links to the writing center community by giving periodic access to written conversations about issues important to those in the field. Printed publications certainly are the mainstay of academic communication, and those who read them and contribute to them form a kind of loose-knit, rather formal, association.

Professional meetings, on the other hand, provide opportunities to exchange fresh ideas face to face, certainly in a more dynamic atmosphere than print, one in which ideas can be discussed and issues wrestled with in brisk face-to-face exchanges. Most conference-goers I know value the personal interaction, the chance to meet colleagues in social settings, an opportunity to go beyond learning new ideas and

learn about the people who share their interest in those ideas. Conferences, however, are not only less formal, they are less frequent and less accessible than print publications. Even during airline fare wars, travel is expensive and time consuming.

As valuable to us as they are, publications and conferences do not necessarily satisfy our desire to be connected to our colleagues. Leahy grants the value of those venues, but adds that he "wanted to actually know some other directors, to get a feel for what it was like to be in their places . . . " (6). He wanted a more intimate view of other places, other people, a view that is not easy to acquire in print because it is not interactive and has a range of expression limited by the formal conventions of academic publication. People do publish articles that describe particular aspects of their operations, but they are not afforded the space to paint a complete picture. And even when we encounter those limited descriptions, we cannot ask questions of the author, except perhaps by using the torturously slow process of writing letters to the publication or directly to the author. Walter Ong says in *Orality and Literacy* that people from primary oral cultures, represented most notably by Plato, find writing to be suspect because it lacks the interactivity of oral communication (79). Print is barren ground in which conversations can only approximate the vibrancy of orality. From printed articles readers primarily learn only what is revealed by words nailed in place by author and editor. In an interactive network environment, where orality and literacy converge, conversation and debate come alive and so do the conversants.

I need now to paint a better picture of the network environment I have been referring to, particularly of the writing center forum that exists in it. "The networks" is shorthand for a vast and intricate system of academic computer networks. It is difficult to describe with any hope of accuracy because each user sees only small slices of the whole, and considering the size and diversity of the network world, individuals' views can easily be reduced to imitations of the proverbial blind men describing an elephant according to the particular piece of it they were touching. Nevertheless, a brief description here will, I hope, help readers unfamiliar with networks to at least form the beginnings of an image.

The largest and most well known of the

networks is Internet (which is, itself, not a single network, but an interwoven lattice of networks). Hundreds of colleges and universities around the world are connected to each other in some fashion via this network of networks. No single school or agency "owns" the network. Each participant contributes resources and pays its own way: collaboration on a grand scale.

Most points along the network (called "nodes") support some kind of software that allows individual users to communicate with each other. Conversations take place in several forms, but perhaps the most valuable for busy faculty and administrators is electronic mail (referred to almost universally as e-mail), which resembles the postal system except that it is exponentially faster. In some ways, computer-mediated communication comes close to eliminating time and distance as barriers to communication, at least reducing them as factors. The ability to communicate in writing at the speed of the telephone creates an environment in which orality and literacy begin to converge, and the result is a virtual space (often called "cyberspace," a term coined by novelist William Gibson) that is fertile ground in which communities can develop.

WCenter is the name of an electronic forum for writing center specialists that has recently been advertised in these pages. It is a Listserv electronic mail distribution list located at and distributed from a mainframe computer at Texas Tech University and was started in February, 1991, by Fred Kemp, Director of Composition, at the suggestion of Lady Falls Brown, Writing Center Director, and Ed Sears, Writing Assistant. Brown announced the creation of the list at the 1991 College Composition and Communication Conference in Boston. "I thought that people involved in writing centers— peer tutors, tutors, directors, etc— would benefit from the opportunity to discuss problems, issues, ideas here. I think one of the best things about WCenter is that it gives people in our field an opportunity to talk 'immediately' with others in our field" (WCenter 27 May 1992).

The sense of immediacy Brown refers to is created by the method of distributing contributions to the WCenter conversation. Listserv, basically, is a program that distributes mail to computer users whose network addresses are placed on its list. When one subscriber sends

a note to the list, each member receives a copy. If we continue to think in terms of the postal service analogy, however, the process must sound rather awkward and tedious, but keep in mind that a note sent to WCenter often reaches all 70+ members of the group within a couple of minutes. Recipients of any given note can respond to it quickly, resulting in correspondence at a pace that makes it resemble oral conversation more than print exchange.

The speed of a network is only one of the key characteristics that sets it apart. Because members of the group are at sometimes great distances from each other and, to a degree, anonymous, a list becomes home to a new kind of community. Howard Rheingold has written about the "virtual communities" that are emerging in the network world, observing that in some ways they are the same as any community, their members engaged in the same activities: chatting, debating, arguing, gossiping, loving, hating, etc. "We do everything people do when people get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind" (2). The difference noted in that last clause, of course, is not inconsiderable, and Rheingold predicts that network interaction "will change us the way telephones and televisions and cheap video cameras changed us— by altering the ways we perceive and communicate" (3). Some might see that as an ominous statement. The technological advances Rheingold points to, especially television, are not universally accepted as boons to humanity. I would not claim, as some do, that technologies are neutral, embodied with whatever value or values are contributed by the humans who use them, but I will suggest that the applications of technology are varied and flexible. Even television, in the hands of intelligent educators, has proven to be beneficial. *Sesame Street* is giving my daughter a better education in the basics of words, letters, and numbers than my wife and I ever could. Network communities are similar. Some people, like Rheingold, see them as an avenue leading to a new and interesting future. Others see them as the bane of civilization. They can be either— or both.

In the case of the writing center community, I believe the network is proving to be closer to Rheingold's vision of it. WCenter has proven to be a sort of "community center" for otherwise isolated writing center people. Each network community develops its own charac-

teristics (an aggregate of its members' personalities, I suppose, but I sometimes think communities may be more than the sum of their parts), and the writing center list has become a place where people are able to talk freely and informally about whatever issues interest them, practical or theoretical or somewhere between. Members of the list can, and do, discuss institutional politics that affect their individual centers, but the discussion is not shadowed by power relationships the way interaction with local colleagues almost inevitable is. No one really has to watch what they say for fear of offending someone with power over them. The tone of the conversation is governed primarily by common courtesy, not fear of reprisal. Although there are members from all levels of institutional hierarchies— students, directors, tutors, and administrators— the authority of each group, or lack of it, is checked at the door once they enter the list's conversation. This leveling of authority is another significant characteristic of network communities and constitutes the virtual removal of barriers that typically impede learning in traditional hierarchies. In this collegial environment, students and administrators come together to talk openly about the various aspects of their centers and their schools, good and bad, and have the luxury of learning from each other.

Of course, I have intentionally loaded this portrayal of the network world with glowing attributes and positive characteristics. This is an unabashed attempt to lure online those writing center people who have not yet discovered the place where isolation can be so easily defeated. I would urge anyone whose curiosity has been piqued here to contact local computer specialists and inquire about getting online. I believe we tend to burn more brightly when in contact with people who share our concerns and face the same challenges we face, and computer-mediated communication is the most fertile environment for professional community-building. However, the networks, like any technology, add new problems for every solution they offer. But I'll save critiques of the medium for another time or another writer.

What might give a more balanced picture of the network environment is an attempt to siphon some of the conversation into print. Future issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* may include a column that will consist primarily of excerpted chunks of WCenter discussions, providing a link between writing center people talking on the networks and those who still depend on print publications for their connection to the professional community.

Eric Crump
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO

* *Internet is not the only academic network, but it is the largest and most inclusive and can serve as an encompassing term.*

Works Cited

Brown, Lady Falls. Note posted to WCenter@TTUVM1 Wed, 27 May 1992 10:29:00 CST. (Note: Unlike many Listserv lists, WCenter mail is not archived. However, several members of the list, including me, retain most notes from the list. Anyone wishing to see excerpts from the list discussions, including the portions cited in this article, may contact me at 314-882-3148 or via e-mail at C509379@mizzou1.bitnet or C509379@mizzou1.missouri.edu or at the Learning Center, 231 Arts & Science, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211.)

Lavers, Norman. "The Telegraph Relay Station." *The Missouri Review* 14:3 (1991), 9-22.

Leahy, Richard. "On Being There: Reflections on Visits to Other Writing Centers." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 15:8 (1991) 1-6.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.* New York: Routledge, 1982.

Rheingold, Howard. "A Slice of Life in My Virtual Community." June 1992. Portions will appear in *Globalizing Networks: Computers and International Communication,* edited by Linda Harasim and Jan Walls for MIT press. Portions will also appear in *Virtual Communities* by Howard Rheingold, Addison-Wesley. Available online via FTP from eff.org or michael.ai.mit.edu, or in hardcopy on request from me, see address listed under "Brown" above.

Entering Electronic Reality

(Editor's note: The following is a message that appeared on the WCenter bulletin board , on 30 March 1992, shortly after the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Boston. Rosemary O'Donoghue has kindly consented to having the message reprinted here.)

I need to tell this story.

After 4C's I returned to Massachusetts very late. (It was snowing in Chicago; the airport was closed; we spent the day reading the *Times* and trying to get on a plane.)

EVEN SO. Monday, the day of THE BIG BITNET HOOKUP, arrived. Now, because I have a very loyal, appreciative staff from all disciplines, including computer science and engineering, my "hookup" was supposed to be painless. The kids had caucused and had found me the perfect GURU— Kevin.

9:00. Child Kevin knocked on the door. After a brief greeting (all the while taking furtive looks at the REAL object of his interest), he sat at my computer and played, humming and smiling. I sat obediently. Quiet. Watching. He tapped out quick, mysterious messages. He brought up screens that I had never seen before. He nodded his head, moved his lips and clucked his tongue and raised his eyebrows. AND MY HARLOT COMPUTER RESPONDED BY BUZZING AND BEEPING CONTENTEDLY.

Then he said, "It'll be ok now. Want to log on yourself?"

I felt immense gratitude. With trepidation, I confessed that I really wanted to know what I was doing. He said, "Oh, sometimes it's better not to know all the theory. Just get a feel for things and you'll whiz along just fine."

"No," I said, "please tell me WHY I'm doing what I'm doing."

With a grand sigh, he started. I took notes, frantically scribbling as he spoke. Every now and then he would ask if I understood, and I would assure him that I did. Then I put the notes aside and touched the keyboard. I accessed the campus computer. I logged on. I subscribed to BITNET. I subscribed to WCenter. My voice was silent, save for the sound of our breathing and the occasional, gentle prompt of my master.

I finished. I turned to him, beaming, proud of myself. I knew I had done a good job. He smiled. "I think you've got it!" he said. "You've got your notes if you forget, but just let me tell you a few more things and I'll get off to class." He spoke; I took further notes, still flushed with my success. He left saying that the documentation was in the mail and I would get it in a few days.

The hum of the computer was deafening. The screen blinked impatiently. I turned to my notes, prepared to send my first message. The impossible scribble stared at me. What did it mean? The arrows and underlines and lists that had seemed so clever now were incomprehensible.

Well, I tried and failed, and I asked everyone I could think of, and finally I had a few basics down. I could get in, and out, and I could send a message. Do anything else? Do what the people on the screen were talking about? Not a chance. But Kevin said the documentation was in the mail. As soon as I figure out what they CALL the things I need to know, I'll read up.

It has been humbling. BUT— substitute writing center for office, paper for computer, prof/tutor for Kevin, student for me....need I say more?

Was it Socrates who spoke of knowing words without understanding? I now have knowledge of my students. I understand what happens between the writing down of what I said and the composing of the revision. I like Child Kevin— a lot, but I'm afraid to tell him that what seemed so clear is really MURK. I haven't lived up to his expectations, and I'm afraid to let him know.

Rosemary O'Donoghue
(RODONOGH@WNEC.BITNET)
Western New England College
Springfield, MA

Subscribing to WCenter

In order to subscribe to WCenter [an electronic forum described in Eric Crump's article, pages 1 to 5 in this issue of the newsletter], send a one-line message using either Bitnet or Internet to LISTSERV@TTUVM1 that says:

SUBSCRIBE WCENTER <YOUR NAME>.

Different schools use different computer systems that connect you to the network. At Texas Tech, we use a system called VAX, which consists of a cluster of mini-computers connected to each other and to the various local and wide area networks, and the EVE text editor. (Mini-computers are much larger and more powerful than the micro-computers like Macintoshes, IBM PCs, or PC clones most of us use.) Other schools use mainframe computers or other kinds of mini-computers to handle their networks.

The various computer systems use different prompts at which you enter the commands to get you connected. The important thing to remember is to enter the LISTSERV@TTUVM1 command at the prompt that asks for the address to which your message is to be sent. You will probably have to include other information to let the computer know whether you're using Bitnet or Internet. It's also important to make sure to enter the SUBSCRIBE message at the message prompt and not the address or subject prompt.

At Texas Tech, using the VAX, EVE, and some custom software commands the following prompts appear and these commands are used:

MAIL>SEND

TO: BITNET%"LISTSERV@TTUVM1" or
     WINS%"LISTSERV@TTUVM1"

SUBJECT: (you can ignore this line)

[END OF FILE] SUBSCRIBE WCENTER ED SEARS

(This is the SUBSCRIBE message. You will, of course, substitute your name where mine appears above. CTRL-Z sends the message on the VAX system we use.)

When your subscription is accepted, you will receive an acknowledgement from the LISTSERV along with other information for the smooth operation of your account. If you're not sure whether your school uses Bitnet or Internet, if the commands shown above don't get you logged on, or if you run into other problems, I suggest you contact your local computer guru for assistance.

Ed Sears
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, TX
YRELS@TTACS

Building a Writing Center: From Idea to Identity by Penny Frankel and Kay Severns. Writing Center Consultants, 1490 West Fork, Forest, IL 60045. 1990. 69pp. $12.00.

Any college, secondary or middle school interested in establishing a writing center or revitalizing one already in place would do well to read *Building a Writing Center: From Idea to Identity* by Penny Frankel and Kay Severns. Coordinators and Directors of the NCTE award-winning Writing and English Resource Center Services, at Deerfield High School in Deerfield, Illinois, Frankel and Severns offer a lively and detailed description of the step-by-step process of bringing a writing center to life. The book contains information on how to acquire funding, set up the space, and staff creatively through use of department members, peer tutors, and adult volunteers. The book also includes chapters on staff training, record-keeping, and evaluation. An appendix provides sample forms for attendance, recruitment of peer tutors, and more.

Building a Writing Center gives a light-hearted guided tour through the authors' two years of experimentation, implementation, and discovery in the process of establishing a successful writing center.

Sherri Goldman and
June Williams
Deerfield High School
Deerfield, Illinois

4th Annual Workshops on Program Planning and Teacher Training

Writing Across the Curriculum

April 2-4, 1993
Troy, Alabama

The program-planning workshop on April 2 is for faculty and administrators interested in beginning a WAC program; the teacher-training workshop will be held on April 3-4. For information, contact Joan Word, WAC Coordinator, Wright Hall 133, Troy State U., Troy, AL 36082 (phone: 205-670-3349).

Call for Papers

6th UK Conference on Computers and Writing

April 13-15, 1993
Dyfed, Wales, UK

"The Experience of Writing"

For information on proposals (deadline: November 15) and the conference, contact Daniel Chandler, Computers & Writing 6, University of Wales, Old College, King Street, ABERYSTWYTH, Dyfed SY23 2AX, Wales, UK (e-mail: compwrit@uk.ac.aberystwyth).

WordPerfect Grammar and Style Checker

Timp Software Company is now offering a shareware program, "Thelma Thistleblossom," that checks grammar and style for WordPerfect documents. If you are interested in further information, contact Laurie James, Timp Software, P.O. Box 37, Orem, Utah 84059.

Conference 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 Johanek, Learning Center, University College, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306

April 17: New England Writing Centers Association, in Burlington, VT
Contact: Jean Kiedaisch, Living/Learning Center, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405

Tutors' Column

Authorizing Voice: Pedagogy, Didacticism and the Student-Teacher-Tutor Triangle*

By the eleventh week of classes, it seemed quite likely that one of my Subject A students wouldn't pass the course; indeed, to my mind and under the circumstances, it began to seem preferable, for I feared for the disheartening burdens a heavy academic schedule would place on the shoulders of a student not truly adept in writing. Over spring break, I'd spent several hours reviewing the videotapes I had made with my two Subject A tutees; it seemed hard to believe that the two students were enrolled in the same class. In even the first few seconds of our tape, Phil exuded pleasure in his newly-discovered self-confidence as a writer. While there were still many stylistic issues to be addressed, they were just that— stylistic. Now that he would doubtless pass the course, my goals for him were to maintain his high degree of motivation, and to further his interest in the complexities and possibilities of strong, insightful academic exposition. We both felt that the rest of the semester would be an exercise in accomplishment, and it was a great delight to see his pride in his achievements.

But Maria was another story. As a new tutor, at the start of the semester I had been greatly relieved to see that both my Subject A students seemed intelligent, disciplined, and dedicated to doing well with the tasks the course presented. My opinion of Maria had not changed during the intervening weeks; indeed, as the semester progressed and she and I began to unearth more problems than we had anticipated, I was impressed by her continued perseverance in the face of mounting impediments. Unfortunately, only some of the problems really lay in Maria's writing; difficulties with her instructor, Beth, presented other obstacles to improvement.

After about the sixth week, interested in her perspective on Maria's progress, I went to see Beth for a short meeting. With her, I reviewed a midterm which had been graded— D+— but not yet returned to Maria. The paper's comments and grade distressed me for several reasons. First, Maria had been getting D and D+ work from the start, and I had hoped to see an improvement in her grade, or at least in the instructor's comments, by then. More worrisome, I felt, was the fact that, despite its grade, the essay seemed to me to be a vast improvement over Maria's previous work, but the changes went unnoticed. Because her writing was plagued with all sorts of problems, from immature thought to logical discontinuities, from lack of structure to several significant sentence-level problems, she and I had been recently been working on idea-generation and overall essay structure, for it seemed that the first task was to help Maria begin to explore how to discover and arrange her thoughts. While her previous week's practice midterm had been, to my mind, a near-total disaster, I was astonished to find that this in-class exam had incorporated all of the major considerations we'd been stressing in the previous week. To be sure, the sentences remained somewhat garbled, and those which were clear revealed a rather immature thought process, but the essay's framework was sound and well-considered: while it is often terribly difficult for any student to "waste" the first few minutes of an in-class exam just thinking and organizing, Maria had clearly taken the time to read the essay question carefully, consider the relevant issues, and compose an outline based on those aspects she wanted to address. To my eyes, the exam demonstrated a clearer recognition of the fundamental tasks of an academic essay.

But Beth had made no comment, whatsoever, about structure, nor, indeed, said anything positive about the essay's content. Instead, she picked apart sentence construction, rewriting whole sentences, reminding Maria to control her nonspecified "wordiness" and to "watch those commas!" with no further

elucidation. Essentially, she threw into Maria's lap the task of incorporating notions which the student didn't understand, thereby mystifying, misleading and ultimately disheartening her. The instructor seemed not only to be abrogating her responsibility to teach, but to be inadvertently punishing Maria in the process. In response to my enthusiastic comments about the paper's improvements, Beth seemed to recognize some of that which she had overlooked, but the fact remained: the paper was graded, and the judgement was made.

Reviewing the tape over Spring break confirmed my fears: in the face of persistent criticism and failing grades, Maria had begun to retreat from the real purpose of the class— to develop an essential familiarity with the process and basic skills of academic self-expression. She had never shirked the work; until the mid-term, she had maintained faith that her efforts would eventually be rewarded with strengthened writing skills and improved grades. It became clear to me, however, that since the midterm, fear had replaced her faith. She no longer saw writing techniques as tools which could, with dedication, be developed; instead, polished academic argument and prose suddenly existed somewhere "out there" beyond her grasp—you either "got" it, or you didn't. In our sessions together, she became more passive, and tended to retreat into the rules of grammar. When asked to rewrite an earlier paper, she clung stubbornly to the task of trying to "put in what Beth wants," rather than dare to create a newly-considered draft.

Her instructor's rigid pedagogical methods had reinforced Maria's sense that writing is about rules, rather than about self-expression. Our videotaped session demonstrated to me that, in allowing Maria's fears to drag us into an examination of the minutiae of grammar, I had reinforced this academic oppression. Despite my distress over my complicity, however, I didn't feel I could in good faith simply encourage her to "forget" the rules and try to write what she thought, for I knew any such attempt would be undermined by her instructor's relentless emphasis on grammar. But to continue to try, as I had in our taped session, to explain the "rules" of grammar was to alienate her further, making writing seem tortuously contrived. I knew that writing needn't be so perplexing for her; she was more

than articulate in ordinary discourse, and the grammatical errors displayed in her writing simply weren't evident in her speech. Further, I had read a paper she had written for a sociology course; even many of the written errors disappeared when she didn't feel she was about to embark on a mystifying minefield called "sentence-level problems."

Despite my fear that I might be overstepping my bounds, when Maria and I met again after Spring break, I managed to express some of my concerns: that I had seen a change of attitude, in confidence, and thought we should talk about that. She talked for quite awhile about her frustration over putting in such hours of effort and receiving so little in return. Somewhat defensively, she confessed her surprise that she might fail the course, and she revealed quite a lot of resentment toward her instructor. I was pleased that she seemed to have located insecurity and frustration as the source of many problems; I had been afraid that she would have chosen to hold herself accountable by deciding she just wasn't smart enough to understand the demands of the task. I asked her if we could talk, together, with my supervisor, as I was unsure of how to proceed, and she, seemingly glad to have all this out in the open, readily agreed.

After listening to Maria and discussing the history of the semester, Danielle suggested that maybe Maria would like me to accompany her to a conference with Beth. Danielle and I emphasized that some of what she was experiencing was beyond her direct control, and that the instructor should be informed of the alienating nature of her constant barrage of small (and what I would call secondary, and even destructive) criticisms. Maria set up the appointment, and we met with Beth at the Subject A office later that week.

It was clear from her opening remark, "So I guess you two have an agenda," that Beth was discomfited by the apparent necessity of a tutor as mediator between her and a student. However, after listening to Maria's account of frustration, and to my observation that many of the grammatical errors seemed to be a consequence of anxiety and poor structural process, Beth seemed more responsive and sympathetic. The three of us proposed an experiment of a few week's duration— Maria would hand in a

rough draft of assignments a day before their official due date, and Beth would respond simply to content and structure. Only after that initial review would Maria go back to address whatever sentence-level problems she might perceive; only that second draft would be graded.

The improvement was, by all accounts, astonishing. Her next paper was coherently structured, reasonably well considered (if not sophisticated) and virtually devoid of sentence-level problems, and earned her a respectable B. While she has still to write one more paper and to take the final exam, it is now apparent to all of us that Maria possesses the abilities to pass the course with ease.

I can't pretend that it was simply a change in an instructor's grading policy that allowed Maria to find her own academic voice; in the final analysis, that may be a minor element. The reading, writing, and analysis

> "Her instructor's rigid pedagogical methods had reinforced Maria's sense that writing is about rules, rather than about self-expression."

she had done in all of the semester's assignments were essential training ground. The nature of one-on-one tutoring surely intensified her examination of the process of analytic composition. But her improvement stems much more directly, I believe, from redefining the terms of their teacher-student relationship. She didn't simply take her "mistakes" to a teacher for further instruction, or swallow them and try to work around them; rather, she discovered that there might be value found in asking a teacher to consider her differently, to try something else.

After the meeting, I taped another of our sessions together. Because Maria was again given the assignment of rewriting an earlier paper of her choice, she and I used twenty minutes to make a nostalgic survey of the semester's work. It would be hard for a disin-

terested viewer to know which of us was the tutor, which the student. Maria did almost all of the talking, analyzing with great ease and confidence the flaws she could perceive, retrospectively, in the semester's early work. When she had decided which paper to rewrite, the most evident change in her exploration of the issues was her markedly increased sense of intellectual confidence. Maria had known all along that she is smart; what she discovered, I think, is an understanding of the personal and social nature which lurks behind so much of the university experience.

For me, the most revealing and significant lessons stems from that first unfortunate tape. In reviewing it, I came to understand that my commitment to the process of tutoring, and the intensity of my focus, could combine to lead a student astray as easily as it could help illuminate and encourage. I began to recognize the need to step back a bit more, and attend even more to the clues Maria was offering me. Perhaps I thought, early in the semester, that I could simply overcome her resistance if only I explained the problems of grammar clearly enough. In retrospect, I saw that in emphasizing didactic methods of education, I had unintentionally wrapped myself in the oppressive mantle of an inflexible pedagogic system. Maria didn't need my drive and commitment in order to understand dangling participles—what she needed was for me to ask why she had withdrawn from our work. Gradually, in watching the tape, I realized that I needed to take a different tack, to include her in my concerns, to encourage her to attend to her own analysis of the problem, and to help her formulate her own approaches to the circumstances: in short, to get away from the rules, to pull back from my authority, and to support instead her self-expression— both in her compositions, and, more importantly, in the classroom.

Rebecca Weller
Peer Tutor
University of California-Berkeley

*This essay was a prize-winner in the 1990 M. Maxwell Contest for Berkeley Writing Tutors

National Certification for a Writing Lab

As in most writing centers across the country, two of the prime interests of the Writing Lab at The College of Charleston are developing the skills of its peer consultants and explaining to those unfamiliar with the nature of writing centers just what peer consultants can accomplish. Recently, our writing lab participated in a national program which helps to achieve both of these goals.

The Writing Lab at The College has undergone a certification process through the prestigious national College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA)[1] and has met the standards of this organization. Having met the CRLA's national standards for training and tutoring makes us the first writing lab in South Carolina to be so certified. And, more important, achieving certification means the Writing Lab can point to national standards to validate how the Writing Lab functions and how it fosters the skills of its peer consultants.

The CRLA certifies programs based on the type of training, the number of hours of training, and the amount of experience acquired by the tutors. Once the program is certified, a college or university can issue certificates to individual tutors who have fulfilled all requirements. Of course, working for certification means compiling a great deal of paperwork, but our College's Director of the Study Skills and Reading Lab acts as the liaison, receiving records for all activities.

To become certified, the writing consultants of our writing lab had to receive a minimum of ten hours training in at least eight of the following topics, as specified by the CRLA:

1. definition of tutoring and [a] tutor['s] responsibilities;

2. basic tutoring guidelines;

3. techniques for successfully beginning and ending a tutor[ing] session;

4. some basic tutoring do's;

5. some basic tutoring don'ts;

6. role modeling;

7. setting goals/planning;

8. communication skills;

9. active listening and paraphrasing;

10. referral skills;

11. study skills;

12. critical thinking skills;

13. compliance with the Ethics and Philosophy of the Tutor Program [as set by each lab];

14. modeling problem solving;

15. other (please specify).

As can be seen, these topics are basic to the training which any lab offers its tutors, and, indeed, most of these topics are pertinent to a writing lab.

How can a lab cover so many topics? Luckily, our Writing Lab is part of a larger system of labs called the College Skills Lab (CSL); as such, the Writing Lab participates in a mass training session held each fall, a session for all the labs of the CSL (accounting, biology, languages, math, writing). During this session, every tutor receives training in areas applicable to all labs, and this training covers the topics listed above plus the value of cultural diversity. Hence, at the beginning of the school year, the Writing Lab consultants have already been trained in the basics.

Of course, the Writing Lab staff meets for its own training sessions during which the Lab can focus on topics germane to writing centers. And since our Lab has regularly scheduled staff meetings, it was not hard to document the types of training, such as a session on the nature of Black English Vernacular, a session on how to help learning disabled students with their writing, and a session on how to assist students writing

papers in history, psychology and religious studies.

Besides the content of the training, the Writing Lab had to describe "modes of tutor training" (such as workshops, videos, and conferences with the tutor trainer or supervisor), the procedures for selecting peer consultants, and the means for evaluating the consultants' performance. The other requirement for certification of the Writing Lab was to show that peer consultants have at least twenty-five hours of experience. Because our lab is open forty-three hours a week, consultants could readily demonstrate the number of hours they had worked.

Of course, the question might be asked whether a writing lab should be evaluated based on standards set by a non-writing lab organization, namely, a reading and study skills association. In other words, if a study skills organization evaluates a writing center, does the writing lab lose its identity and its focus? Since the CRLA uses criteria universal to all tutoring and since there is no national group to evaluate writing labs, it seems justified to try for certification. Another objection would be that the CRLA's criteria direct the lab's training, thus forcing the writing lab to "teach to the test." However, we found that we were already training the consultants in the areas specified, so the national organization validated the good work of our writing lab. In other words, the standards of certification help to delineate the functions of a lab and its consultants. As a result, when we are asked what we do, as so many of us are asked, we can help to dispel the "tradition of misunderstanding" (Harris 19) that seems to prevail.

And naturally, the consultants will benefit as well. Being consultants in a certified lab looks impressive on a resume and certainly sets them apart as job candidates. But beyond adding to the resume, certification should help peer consultants realize that they are trained professionals, meeting national standards. I cannot imagine a better boost for morale.

Bonnie Devet
The College of Charleston
Charleston, SC

Endnote

[1]The address for the CRLA is
Dr. Tom Grier
University of Alaska—Anchorage
Department of English/ASL/ESL
3211 Providence Drive
Anchorage, Alaska 99508

Work Cited

Harris, Muriel. "What's Up and What's In: Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal* 11.1 (1990): 15-25.

National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing

Oct. 23-24, 1992
Indiana, PA

"All About Talk"

keynote speaker: Wendy Bishop

Participants include faculty members, tutors (undergraduate and graduate students), and administrators from colleges and high schools.

Contact the conference co-chairs: Lea Masiello and Ben Rafoth, or the conference coordinator, Beth Boquet, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Department of English, Indiana, PA 15705-1094 (412-357-3029 or 357-2261) Bitnet: LMASIELI@IUP

Tutoring Two Students at the Same Time

Students who come to the writing lab need time to write; however, the time and availability of tutors is often limited. At the University of Akron we deal with this situation by scheduling two students at the same time, with the same tutor. Having a tutor work with two students during the same hour-long session encourages using the activity of writing itself as a way for students to learn to write. The one-tutor, two-student situation provides students with both a supportive, non-threatening environment and unhurried time for writing.

Some of the social/psychological effects of this "individual tutoring in a group" contribute to a feeling of community:

(1) Tension may be reduced. It can be helpful for a student to have a physical reminder that everyone has some difficulty writing. In this case, the reminder is the simple presence of another student. An unspoken sense of community may develop, and a student's confidence may improve when another struggling writer is present.

(2) When the students outnumber the tutor two-to-one, the balance of power silently shifts away from the tutor toward the students. The students take more responsibility for their own writing, and the tutor is reminded that he/she is a tutor who assists the students rather than an authority who tells them the "right" thing to write.

(3) There are those infrequent but especially rewarding times when students become interested in each other's writing projects and collaborate spontaneously, often without regard to their differing writing abilities. As a community of learners, students share ideas and interpretations, an opportunity which might have been missed had each writer been assigned individual appointment times. Such collaboration makes the writing/learning process even more effective—for both the students and the tutor, who learns the value of collabora-tion by seeing, firsthand, how much students can teach each other.

Often one student must sit and wait while the tutor and the other student talk about an assignment or a draft. This situation can be advantageous in several ways, most of which are a result of providing time for thinking and writing:

(1) The "waiting" student has time to quietly review the work that he/she wishes to consider with the tutor. This time is especially valuable for the student who has not committed himself/herself to the assignment and who needs to develop "ownership" of the work in progress. When left to spend a little time silently reflecting upon the assignment or rereading his/her own draft, a student can often come to a clearer understanding of just what it *is* he/she needs to do. The student may make progress on the assignment even before the tutor is ready to give full attention to that student.

(2) The waiting student may learn a good bit about the writing process or about specific requirements of a particular type of writing while observing the interactions between the tutor and the other student. The waiting student may even scan his/her own work to consider those concepts which are being discussed at the other side of the table.

(3) Having another student "waiting in the wings" is an incentive for the tutor to follow the writing lab mandate to work on one thing at a time. A student can absorb a limited amount of information in one session; addressing every problem in a paper can actually be counterproductive, as the student may not be able to assimilate any one concept well. Limiting teaching to one particular area of concern allows time for learning to take place within the student. The presence of the waiting student puts a little pressure on the tutor to avoid "doing everything."

(4) Since the first student's appointment is not over as soon as he/she has finished the initial consultation with the tutor, there is plenty of time for that student to think about and practice what he/she has just learned. The "extra" time that is left in the session is time designed for the first student to WRITE, even if the tutor must insist upon it!

(5) While writing, a student may become aware of other concerns— problems with content or grammar, or editing concerns. As long as the student is in the writing lab the session has not ended. There is a tutor at arm's length. What a comfort!

Susanna Horn
University of Akron
Akron, OH

If I Could Only Burn My Bra Now

I guess the day a student brought her paper in to the Writing Center for me to read started all this. For an English class, she had to research her birth date in 1972 and then explore a fashion trend advertised in that day's newspaper. She chose the fabric called polyester as her subject. Her conclusions about polyester set me off down "memory lane," and in responding, I shared my ideas. After all, I had been a young married woman then, not that far from being up on the fashion trends of the time. I said, "For the majority of women, polyester was not equated with the plastic skirt you mentioned in your third paragraph. It was our liberation. Kind of like the bra burnings were for the feminists."

She looked at me. "Oh, yeah, I get it," she said.

"We'd had enough," I went on, "after years of ironing cotton blouses, skirts and dresses and then looking crumpled before we even got to work. Easy wash, easy wear polyester gave us a way to look tidy without effort." She didn't write down my comments, just the places where I found comma splices and misspellings. "So much happened back then," I said, visualizing the panorama of change, but trying not to talk too much. "Even our hairdos became wash and wear. We retired our irons, our plastic hair rollers, and when pantyhose came out, we finally stripped off the girdles with those lousy garters."

She looked down at the paper and then up at me. I could see her thinking: Imagine! A world before pantyhose or the handy curling iron. "Nowadays you girls buy those gaudy garter belts and call them sexy. In the 60s and 70s those were torture to sit in all day. Sexy to us was going bare: we rejected all the foundation garments that had cinched our waists for too long. "Some girls burned or buried their bras," I continued, "and stopped shaving their legs and underarms, all for being natural and free. I knew a few who wouldn't even wear deodorant anymore because it wasn't natural. You see? Polyester started a revolution." Realizing I'd probably talked too much, I waited for her to respond.

"I have class in a few minutes," she said, interrupting the stream of memorable liberations that I'd taken for granted. It had been a long time since I thought about how far we'd all come, baby! She read the concluding paragraphs about polyester reflecting the plastic, phony society of the time. But I saw those days differently now, thanks to her. "Grammatically, your paper could be revised in the few areas I pointed out," I said at the end of the reading. "But you could really strengthen your idea if you interviewed someone who was not a hippy back then. You know, a counter-counter-culturist. Then you'd see what polyester meant to the majority of us."

"Thanks for your help," she said, gathering up her paper and stuffing it into her backpack. "I have to turn this in in ten minutes."

Maybe I learned something during that session: writing a paper once is enough for some. Not going deeply into a subject reflects the society America has become in my own lifetime: instant, but in need of re-vision.

Diane Kulkarni
Weber State University
Ogden, Utah

Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers. Ilona Leki. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992. 151 pp. $18.50

At last! Now there is an in-depth book addressed to those of us who have not had formal training in teaching ESL but who work on writing skills with international students. The first section of this highly readable paperback provides context by beginning with a brief history of ESL writing instruction and then a summary of models of second language acquisition. Even a quick reading of the discussion on various models of second language acquisition should help to convince tutors that, despite the requests of ESL students, it is not a profitable use of tutorial time to note and correct all grammatical errors in a paper or to spend large amounts of time explaining the endless intricacies of grammatical rules.

The next section focuses on the students— the differences between ESL and basic writers and the varying educational, political, economic, and cultural backgrounds ESL students bring to the educational settings we offer them.

The remainder of the book looks more closely at components of ESL writing. Chapters here deal with writing assignments that may cause trouble for ESL students, differences in the composing processes of second language writers, differences in cultural preferences that impinge on writing, and the issue of errors in ESL writing, including a catalog of typical errors made by ESL writers and possible sources of these errors.

The wealth of truly useful information in this book ensures that it will become a regular entry on reading lists for tutor training programs.

Address correction requested