

The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

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

Volume 17, Number 3

November, 1992

*....from the editor....*

As usual, newsletter articles and columns in this issue deal with concerns that confront us on a daily basis: working with international students, using computers effectively in the tutoring process, coping with defeatist attitudes that students bring to tutorials, dealing with institutional contexts, building a community of writers when they are required to come for tutoring, and helping writers develop thesis statements.

Thus, authors of newsletter articles provide us with insights, suggestions, concepts, and tutorial strategies. And readers often provide us with questions that suggest further articles or other newsletter contributions. Two excellent possibilities that have been raised focus on sharing content and goals of your tutor training courses and also stories of being either marginalized within your institution or becoming an integral part of it. Contributions to these topics don't need to be article-length essays, so feel free to write a paragraph or two to share with the rest of us.

•Muriel Harris, editor

*....inside....*

<b>Foreign Students in the Writing Lab: Some Ethical and Practical Considerations</b>	
•Kate Gadbow	1
<b>Announcements and Conference Calendar</b>	6
<b>The Use of Computers in the Tutoring Process: Overcoming Communication Obstacles Between the Tutor and the ESL Student</b>	
•Sandra Ridpath	7
<b>Tutors' Column</b>	
•Marnie Larkin	9
<b>Voices from the Net</b>	
•Eric Crump	10
<b>Building a Community of Writers in a Required Lab: A Paradox and a Dilemma</b>	
•Joseph Saling and Kelly Cook-McEachern	13
<b>The USW Method</b>	
•Flavio Chavez	15

**Foreign Students in the Writing Lab: Some Ethical and Practical Considerations**

Four years ago this fall, I began my job as director of the University of Montana Writing Lab. Like most beginning directors, I was full of enthusiasm, determined to be all things to all people. In November of that year, a young Japanese woman came to me and asked for help. She was a graduate student in business working on a master's thesis. Her advisor had sent her to us because, as the student put it, the thesis had a few problems. And so began one of the longest, most frustrating, yet most rewarding, of my tutoring relationships—one that made me confront my own limitations and presented me with a dilemma I've come a long way toward understanding, but have yet to really resolve.

As soon as I started working with Yumiko (not her real name), I saw that what I'd thought would be a matter of a few meetings during which we'd maybe clear up the placement of a few definite articles was turn-

ing into a huge commitment because of problems I hadn't anticipated. She did have trouble with articles. But there were also syntax problems, usage problems, and what looked at first like a complete lack of organization. To compound these difficulties, I found in talking to Yumiko that she understood her subject very well and was enormously frustrated with her inability to make it comprehensible and accessible to me. Moreover, she had a significant emotional investment in it as her thesis dealt with the history of woman in Japan, culminating with the place of Japanese women in today's business world, something she knew about and had suffered from.

Yumiko was nearly forty when I met her. Through most of her adult life she'd taken care of her dying mother, working at high-responsibility but low-prestige jobs, mostly with import firms. She put her sister through school and got her safely married. When her mother died, she discovered she was very lonely. As an unmarried businesswoman she had no social life and really no professional friendships since much Japanese business is conducted after hours in bars that exclude women. She had decided she would never get anywhere in Japanese business—for reasons detailed in her paper—and was coming to the U.S. to escape and start a new life. This project had to be perfect in order to get her an MBA. She had used up all her savings and now depended on her younger sister's husband, something that bothered her a great deal.

We became friends. And, because she was my friend, as her deadline loomed I found myself becoming less and less Yumiko's teacher and more and more her editor. Even though she diligently wrote down everything I said, the same problems kept popping up in subsequent drafts. I found myself simply fixing them. I began to rearrange sentences just because they sounded better. She made the deadline and produced a nicely written, technically perfect paper. The business school was impressed and wanted to publish the paper in its quarterly journal. Yumiko graduated and went out to seek a job in American business. Her resume was impressive (I know because we worked on it, line by line, together). Still, I said goodbye to Yumiko with a sinking feeling, because I knew that if she got that job she was looking for, she'd have trouble composing a simple letter without help.

Since that time, I've worked with many foreign students. While none have taken quite as much of my time and energy as Yumiko did, many have produced in me the same confusions and doubts, what can be seen as an ethical dilemma, ethical because it really does involve moral limits and the personal welfare of the students. I, and the TA's who have worked with me, have had to ask ourselves over and over again: How much help is enough? How much is too much? Is "fixing up the grammar"—editing if you will—something we should resist at all costs, or is this a legitimate function of the writing lab regarding these students? In "translating" a text, are we taking it away from the writer and making it something he or she would never have written, or are we bringing the level of writing up to one more consistent with that writer's real ability and knowledge?

While some of these questions are ones that can be applied to all students who visit writing labs everywhere, the caliber of and pressures on the foreign students at our university make these questions, for me, particularly urgent.

The University of Montana serves a relatively high percentage of foreign students for an inland state university. Most are Asian, from China and Japan. Many have come on their own, but some have been brought here through special exchange programs our university has

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

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

cultivated with their governments. Many are the best and brightest in their own countries, most graduate students in business with excellent study skills and impressive knowledge of their subject matter. The main scholastic problem, sometimes the only one, is written English.

These students take a language placement test (TOEFL) when they come to the university. If the test demonstrates a need, they take one or both ESL courses we offer. Beyond that they're on their own. Most have huge study loads. Their departments want them to succeed so they send them to the Writing Lab. Too often their professors want us to do exactly what I've outlined above as problematic: to fix up the English so they can judge the papers on content rather than on these pesky little surface errors.

In an effort to aid these students, I've begun to look around for help and have found it. At least I have found resources that have helped me better understand the problems, if not find the solution to my ethical dilemma regarding limits.

Ann Raimes' excellent *Grammar Troubleshooting: an Editing Guide for ESL Students* sits on my desk and when I'm working with a foreign student, we find the rule together. If there's a rule to cover the error, we discuss it, even if it means we don't "fix up" as much of the paper as the student would like.

However, as most people who work with second language learners know, the rules are the easy part. Most foreign students, more so than many of our native students, are hungry for rules governing language. They're willing to do exercises, memorize lists. The problem is that our quirky, derivative language often has more exceptions than it does rules for a particular usage. And so, much to the writer's frustration and ours, we have to resort to explanations like "it just sounds better—trust me." The only consolation we can give them is that the more they speak, read, and write English, the more they'll develop an "ear" for it.

Still, with some students, even those obviously bright, desperate for success, and willing to memorize all the rules and exceptions I could give them, I was having very little success in changing writing patterns, particularly in areas of organization and development. I didn't really understand why until I read Muriel Harris'

*Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference* and some of the works she cites. Paraphrasing a Robert Kaplan article on cultural thought patterns, Harris says, "Oriental paragraphs are marked by indirection. The Oriental writer will circle around a subject, showing it from a variety of tangential views, but not looking at it directly. Development can be in terms of what things are not rather than what they are" (90).

She adds: "Kaplan's work can serve as an important reminder in our evaluation and diagnostic work that we cannot merely label as errors or problems those characteristics in the discourse of non-native speakers of English which they bring with them from the rhetorical traditions of their own languages. Instead, we must realize the difficulty these students will have in trying to learn—and accept as appropriate—cultural perspectives that may overturn or upset many of their unconscious assumptions about the world" (91).

I better understood why a Chinese student's paper was riddled with clichés after reading Harris' paraphrase of Carolyn Matalene. Harris says, "Students trained in Chinese traditions absorb a cultural heritage that emphasizes memorization of phrases from classical sources and that values working within given traditions, not departing from them. To such students our recommendations that they avoid clichés and seek to use original phrases are counseling them to 'write like uneducated barbarians'" (89-90).

I began to understand why I was finding so many Oriental students' papers obscure when I read: "In some languages, such as English, the writer (or speaker) is the person primarily responsible for effective communication, for making clear, well-organized statements. In other languages, however, such as Japanese, the reader (or listener) is the person primarily responsible, meaning that if a breakdown in communication occurs, it is the reader who assumes the burden or responsibility because he or she hasn't exerted enough effort" (Harris 91).

All this research has led to some understanding. I'm better able to counsel restraint to my TA's who are constantly tempted to take shortcuts and "fix" the papers before students really understand what is wrong. The practical pressures to do so are, if anything, growing. Overenrollment in our university has increased

class size so that faculty, including ESL faculty, have fewer hours for individual work with these students. There are other tutoring programs on campus, but the students must pay for these, and by and large, the foreign students have little spare cash. So they come to us. Last year's statistics show the trend: Fall quarter, 8% of the students visiting the Lab were foreign students. Winter, the number jumped to 13%. By spring quarter, 21% of Lab users were classified as non-native speakers. Because of increased use of the Lab, (and no increase in funding or personnel) we have to limit appointments to a 1/2 hour during the latter half of the quarter, scarcely time to get through a page of complex, error-ridden prose. If these students make multiple appointments in one day, other students resent it.

I don't know if there's an answer for this. I would certainly like to hear about what other universities are doing to meet the needs of foreign students in the writing lab. I do know that focusing on the problem and researching it has led me to greater understanding of, and respect for, the difficulties these students face.

I imagine readers are wondering what happened to Yumiko. My fears were realized and she didn't get a job, despite her resume, although she did get several interviews. Her spoken English was poor too. She went back to Japan and went to work for an international company, translating English letters to Japanese, something she is very good at. I hear from her every now and then and she seems fairly happy, although she does live with her sister and has little or no social life. I felt badly about this for awhile, thinking I may have failed her in ways I didn't even understand. But I began to feel better after recently reading Mike Rose's wonderfully inspirational book *Lives on the Boundary*. In that book, Rose deals mostly with what he calls America's educational underclass—remedial students. But many of the problems faced by these students and their teachers can be applied to foreign students as well. Rose, like Mina Shaughnessy, puts error in a new perspective—that of growth. He says: "As writers move further away from the familiar ways of expressing themselves, the strains on their cognitive and linguistic resources increase, and the number of mechanical and grammatical errors they make shoots up" (189). Therefore, he says, "Error marks the place where education begins" (189). Perhaps we can help foreign

students understand this and take heart when, at times, their errors seem to be increasing rather than diminishing.

Rose also suggests that in just talking to these students, in treating them with respect and getting to know them, we do something to alleviate what must be a terrible loneliness brought on by the move to a new culture. He puts it this way:

A much deeper sense of isolation comes if the loneliness you feel is rooted in the books and lectures that surround you, in the very language of the place. You are finally sitting in the lecture hall you have been preparing to sit in for years. You have been the good student, perhaps even the star—you are to be the engineer, the lawyer, the doctor. Your parents have knocked themselves out for you. And you can't get what some man is saying in an introductory course. You're not what you thought you were. The alien voice of the lecturer is telling you that something central to your being is, after all, a wish spun in the night, a ruse, the mist and vapor of sleep (174).

If we can do something in the writing lab to counter this feeling, to restore a sense of self, perhaps we are helping.

I have also come to feel that the relationship developed between teacher and student, between tutor and tutee, is perhaps more to the point than is the perfection of the product. As Rose says: "We need an orientation to instruction that provides guidance on how to determine and honor the beliefs and stories, enthusiasms, and apprehensions that students reveal. How to build on them, and when they clash with our curriculum [and in this case with our culture]... how to encourage a discussion that will lead to reflection on what students bring and what they're currently confronting" (236).

And he adds: "Each member of a teacher's class, poor or advantaged, gives rise to endless decisions, day-to-day determinations about a child's reading and writing: decisions on how to tap strength, plumb confusion, foster growth. The richer your conception of learning and your understanding of its social and psychological dimensions, the more insightful and effective your judgments will be" (236).

Perhaps, then, just by accepting the complexity of the relationship between language and thought, between one culture and another, and by helping students accept that real learning takes place bit by bit, we are doing all we can do. Now, the trick is convincing these hard-pressed students—and the professors who send them to us hoping for miracles—that it's enough.

Kate Gadbow  
University of Montana  
Missoula, MT 59801

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**1993 Kellogg Institute  
for the Training and Certification  
of Developmental Educators**

**June 25-July 23  
Boone, NC**

For applications and further information, contact Elaine Bingham, Director of the Kellogg Institute, or Margaret Mock, Administrative Assistant, National Center for Developmental Education, Appalachian State University, Boone NC 28608 (704-262-3057). Application deadline is March 15, 1993.

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**Call for Papers**

I am interested in receiving essays, stories, and poems written by tutors about their initial tutoring sessions. I will be attempting to publish a book to be used as a training resource. Due to the complex nature of tutoring and the inexperience of new tutors, the value of such a collection written by tutors is potentially great. I hope that you share my excitement, and I look forward to receiving your work.

1. Essays ought to be three to ten pages in length (exclusive of appendices); stories shouldn't be longer than fifteen pages; poems should be under four pages.
2. All work should be grounded in specific tutorial experiences, issues, or theories.
3. Please keep all references to tutees general.
4. Please use the MLA style of parenthetical citation for documented work.
5. Please enclose an S.A.S.E. for manuscript return.
6. Each tutor is limited to one submission per genre.
7. Please postmark your submission before 22 December 1992, and mail it to Stephen Murabito, 136 FOB, University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, Mount Pleasant Road, Greensburg, PA 15601.



**Call for Proposals  
15th Annual Conference  
of the  
East Central Writing Centers  
Association**

**March 12-13  
Muncie, IN**

***"Writing Centers: Innovative Theories  
and Practices"***

**Featured Speakers: Jeanne Simpson  
and James Berlin**

All proposals should include plans for audience participation. For a form and further information, contact Cindy Johaneck, English Dept., Writing Center (317-285-8535; e-mail: 00cljohaneck@leo.bsuvc.bsu.edu) or Laura Helms, Writing Coordinator, University College Learning Center (317-285-8094; FAX: 317-285-2167), Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306. Deadline: November 9, 1992.

**Call for Proposals**

**New England Writing Centers  
Association Conference**

**April 17, 1993  
Burlington, Vermont**

***"Reopening the Dialogue"***

**Keynote speaker: Muriel Harris**

In this eighth annual conference for high schools and colleges, we will explore who we are and where we are going. Possible topics include the relationship between writing centers and the academy, between writing centers and the larger community, between high schools and colleges, between mainstream and nontraditional pedagogies. Send a 1-2 page description of your one-hour workshop, including intended audience and equipment needs, to Leone Scanlon, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610 (508-793-7469). Proposal deadline: Dec. 4, 1992.

**4th Annual Meeting  
of the  
South Carolina Writing Centers  
Association**

**Jan. 29, 1993  
Spartanburg, SC**

***"Weaving the Writing Center into  
the Fabric of Our Schools"***

**Keynote Speaker: Dixie Goswami**

Contact Bonnie Auslander, The Writing Center, Converse College, Spartanburg, SC 29302-0006 (803-596-9613).

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

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: Cindy Johaneck, English Department, and Laura Helms, Learning Center, University College, Ball State Univ., 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

## The Use of Computers in the Tutoring Process: Overcoming Communication Obstacles Between the Tutor and the ESL Student

Maria, a non-native speaker of English, was the first student I worked with at the Writing Center. I began our session with the usual polite conversation. As we exchanged pleasantries, however, I felt somewhat ill at ease because I had difficulty understanding Maria's accent. I set about to find a common ground in Maria's economics assignment for clear communication. With equal frustration, I saw immediately that I couldn't read Maria's handwriting. I struggled with "Could you please tell me this word? Can you explain this phrase, this sentence, this thought...?" At this point Maria was scheduled for class, and we decided to set up another appointment. I decided to consider this experience a lesson in humility and begin anew with Maria the next session. I also resolved to schedule a longer session to give us sufficient time, but Maria didn't come back for that next scheduled appointment.

In the weeks that followed, I came across an article that helped tremendously when Maria and I finally did see each other once again some weeks later, Evelyn Posey's "Micro Style" Column in the December 1989 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* (Vol. 14, No. 4), entitled "Using a Word Processor to Enhance Prewriting." In the article the technique I find useful is "cooperating audience" which, according to Posey, "effectively demonstrates the importance of audience" (12). In this technique, Posey explains, two students sit along side of the composing student at the computer during the prewriting stage. During this stage the student audience may interrupt the composer for "clarification, an explanation, or a specific example—anything that will help the writer sense what his audience needs to understand the communication" (13). Audience comments are limited to content at this stage, and Posey suggests mechanical errors, such as sentence structure and word choice, be covered in another session.

Using a variation of the cooperating audience technique, I adapted this strategy to combat the language barrier and problem of illegibility in Maria's handwriting the next time

we met for a tutoring session. Since Maria had a rough draft ready during our next session, I used the cooperating audience idea as a rewriting strategy. I asked Maria to type her rough draft into the computer and as a one-person audience, I sat down beside her. As Maria began typing I could hear beyond the spoken language barrier and see beyond the written language barrier. The computer's clear alphabet type became the common ground for understanding and communicating with Maria.

Now Maria's composition presented a third problem. I asked her what audience she wanted to direct her paper to, because I realized that the economic concept Maria was describing in her paper was unclear. After Maria decided that as a layperson, I would be typical of the audience she was directing herself to and not someone knowledgeable about economic principles, I felt free to play sounding board. Each time I couldn't grasp a clear understanding of Maria's explanation of the supply/demand theory, I would simply say, "Do you mean this...?" and paraphrase for her. Maria would either confirm my account or retell the places where I had not grasped the basics. When she felt comfortable that she had re-explained her point clearly, then I would ask her, "Maria, what about using that explanation in your assignment?" She would stop, think, and I would in the meantime ask again, "How do you feel about your explanation to me versus what you have written—which one do you think is clearer? What basics in the professor's lectures is he interested in seeing that you have grasped?" Maria would explain, "Well, he is probably trying to see if I can explain this as well as he has taught it to me."

Now, with the cursor positioned and focused on the area in question, Maria could make her own independent decision to revise her paper without the burden of conventional revising, such as erasing or scribbling out words and trying to cram new thoughts above and below existing text. Now she could retype the section, adding details she decided would make things clearer or delete unwanted words

or phrases with relative ease. For example, after I asked Maria how the word "aggregate" was used or what it meant in context, she decided to include a definition of "aggregate" after the following sentence:

The key concept in analyzing output, inflation and growth, and the role of policy are aggregate supply and aggregate demand. *Aggregate supply is the term used to mean the total output of goods and services back to the consumer. Aggregate demand is the total consumer need for goods and services.*

Maria was able to create the space to insert the definition of "aggregate" by simply moving text with one computer stroke. Additionally, she made the decision to delete confusing or unwanted words in the following sentence:

A consumer *rarely realizes sometimes* how this theory works in everyday life....

I explained to Maria that "rarely" indicates seldom or maybe never. " 'Sometimes,' " I continued, "seems to change the meaning to 'maybe once in awhile.' " Maria selected the following meaning:

A consumer *seldom realizes* how this theory works in everyday life.

Instructor revisions on a student's paper often frustrate the student, because marginal notes and a variety of proofreading symbols can overwhelm the original text, giving it a cluttered appearance so that a new confusion results. Lack of space on student rough drafts and the red-pen effect can give a paper a look of belonging to the instructor instead of to the student. The computer as a revision aid, on the other hand, is extremely neat and friendly. Students can adjust line spacing. They can overtype on the original text or insert revised information above or below the old information for comparative purposes before making a final decision. They can quickly delete text.

At the computer, the tutor is relegated to audience position automatically because two people cannot enter text together at the computer terminal. The student remains the manipulator of the original text and, therefore, the owner. Once Maria made her revisions, I would start the process over again if something remained unclear. We were talking

together, cooperatively listening, and mutually revising with the computer. Maria became involved, animated and confident as my feedback became closer and closer to the reaction she really wanted from her professor. I was gaining confidence with handling two very real problems in a growing multi-cultural college community: spoken and written communication difficulties between the student and tutor in the college writing center.

In tutoring, the ultimate goal is student independence through mastery of skill. One effective way to promote such independence in the student is teaching basic computer know-how coupled with audience strategies such as Posey's "Cooperating Audience." During initial tutoring sessions the writing center tutor can teach basic computer skills as well as use techniques such as Posey's "Cooperating Audience" to model effective audience questions aimed at the assignment's purpose and meaning. The student will eventually begin to interact independently with text on the computer. Because textual revisions are easily achieved with the computer, the student gains quickly in confidence with the use of the computer for rewriting. Because the tutor has asked such important audience questions as "What do you really mean?" the student becomes familiar with asking herself similar audience questions. With its visual clarity the word processor as a rewriting aid is invaluable in taking the verbal communication pressure off both the tutor and non-native speaker of English. Also, at those times when a student's handwriting, however appropriate for his or her own culture, is difficult for the English instructor to read, the computer's clear alphabet type eases the communication barrier and aids the tutor in achieving clear and purposeful instruction in the writing process.

Sandra Ridpath  
Widener University  
Chester, PA



## Tutors' Column

My 4:30 appointment slid into a chair, thrust his draft across my desk, and emitted a long sigh as I prepared to approach his work. He curled himself into a human ball and shuffled his feet rhythmically as I skimmed the opening lines of his paper. Soon my sighs, too, were filling the room.

I am often frustrated by the self-defeating attitude tutees display. There is an automatic assumption on their part, and perhaps those of tutors also, that the contents of their prospective papers are incorrect or inadequate. If it is not the thesis, then it is the grammatical structure. If it is not spelling, then it is punctuation. *No one* can create a perfect paper.

This conclusion might be true to a certain extent, but it also leads tutees to enter their tutoring sessions halfheartedly and somewhat depressed. My average tutee shuffles in, hands over his/her paper, and slumps backward preparing for the worst. This definite lack of enthusiasm is not only damaging to the tutee, it is also depressing for me. Who wants to help people who consistently have no confidence in their own writing abilities?

I am being a hypocrite even as I compose this very article, for I am also doubtful of my power to adequately express meaning. Almost everyone on this planet has been shoved into the role of writer at some point or another. It is a frightening process that demands that we exert ourselves in ways understandable to others. Writing is both a process and a product that is constantly being evaluated and judged. A piece of blank paper offers endless possibilities at the same moment it enforces certain limitations. Tutees have good cause to be overwhelmed by their assignments and their consequent papers. Therefore our duty as tutors is twofold: first, we must help destroy the barrier imposed by the process of writing, and second, we must create tutoring sessions which are both relevant and meaningful.

How can we accomplish these overwhelming goals successfully? The solution is some-

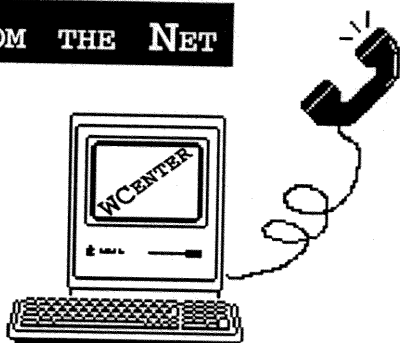
times slow in coming, but overall, very simple: HAVE FUN! Tutoring sessions do not have to be limited to dry one-on-one discussions; they can be as unusual as a tutor is willing to permit. The point is to show the tutee that writing is an exciting, scary, and *creative* process. Confining yourself to an analysis of their mistakes and problem areas only encourages tutees' sense of low self-confidence. Be original! Be wacky! A meaningful tutoring session helps build everybody's level of esteem, including yours. When a tutee leaves smiling and is inspired to begin revisions, the tutor, too, has gained new insights.

I have read confusing papers out loud and encouraged the tutee to laugh along with me as I stumble over misleading sentence structure and poor grammar. This helps the tutee to appreciate her mistakes and not be ashamed of them. I have created bizarre analogies to make tutees approach their writing from a different perspective. For instance, I asked a student having trouble with a comparison paper to describe the opposing views as if he were broadcasting a football game. A little unusual perhaps, but he understood exactly the point I was trying to express. I almost always try to leave my desk and make notes either on charts or the blackboard. Putting suggestions where they can be easily seen and altered makes the session easier for both me and the tutee. We are not hunched over a single copy of a draft while I make notes in the margins.

Writing centers were created to assist students in the various aspects of writing fundamental to college studies. Tutoring sessions have evolved to be a core mechanism in this giant operation. Assistance and advice are critical during these sessions, but they need to be accompanied by a positive attitude. If we, as tutors, strive to create meaningful and creative sessions, we will succeed in pointing out the difficulties of writing at the same moment we are building tutees' self-esteem and bettering their abilities.

Marnie Larkin  
University of Richmond  
University of Richmond, VA

VOICES FROM THE NET



---ERIC CRUMP

### Grappling with Institutional Contexts

The conversation below is imported from WCenter, an electronic forum for writing center specialists. It has been imported here in an effort to give more writing center people a glimpse into the on-line conversations that are growing in importance to those in the field who have access to them.

The discussion began in May when Wilkie Leith, director of the writing center at George Mason University, posted a note to WCenter that was a reaction to Valerie Balester's article in the May 1982 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, "Revising the Statement: On the Work of the Writing Center," a critical response to the CCC Committee on Professional Standards' progress report on the 1989 Statement of Principles and Standards. Balester's article was a springboard into a discussion about the practical and political relationships between writing centers and their institutions.

This column is a community effort, a collaboration. There is not enough space here to include all the notes on the subject, or to recognize all the "authors," but more columns will follow that trace further this and other threads of discussion.

From: Wilkie Leith; Wed, 13 May 1992  
12:03:00 EST  
Subject: May issue, CCC

THREE HUNDRED CHEERS FOR VALERIE  
BALESTER!!!

Valerie has voiced the concerns that many of us had when the "Statement of Professional Standards" first came out of committee. When the statement first appeared, I was irate at the way writing centers were portrayed—they resided at the end of the statement under a section designated as support for classroom teachers—we actually were listed on the same line with secretarial support, photocopying services, etc. At the conference that year I contacted other writing center people, and we went to the executive committee at the business meeting. Jim Slevin actually put his head on the table in shame when I pointed out this miscarriage, but I'm also ashamed to say that, although I intended to follow the revision, I failed to do so. The result was an equally weak revision. In just a few years, writing centers have increased significantly in status. Please read this issue and see what we all have to say—maybe we can publish our dialogues!

From: Eric Crump; Thu, 14 May 92 23:16:25  
CDT  
Subject: Valerie's manifesto

I mean "manifesto" in a good sense, by the way. What struck me most immediately about Valerie's article was the tone: assertive without ever becoming strident. And that tone is appropriate to the position she staked out concerning the Wyoming Statement, the field of composition studies, and their perceptions about and apparent attitudes toward writing centers. Her main point, as I read it, is a call for institutional powers ...to recognize the value of writing centers as full partners in writing curricula, rather than the subordinate servants they've been in the past.

From: Eric Crump; Tue, 19 May 1992  
10:10:20 CDT  
Subject: Valerie's manifesto

What does everyone else think? What is it about the article, its tone, the place and context of its publication that are so good? What does it mean in terms of the direction the writing center field could be or should be or is going?

Let's talk.

From: Mickey Harris; Tue, 19 May 1992  
22:36:45 EST  
Subject: Re: Valerie's manifesto

Eric,  
What's so good? Well, for starters, Valerie keeps a sane, rational tone and argues cogently..... She points to specific places in the statement where writing centers are ignored or assumed to be peripherally included—as if they are a mere subset of composition. That, I think, is at the heart of why the rest of the composition world continues to dismiss writing centers.....What's crucial for us is to help the rest of the world of composition see that what we do is different in kind...no longer that expensive frill doomed to having to justify our existence and to being paranoid about having our doors shut at the whim of someone trying to reduce expenses.

Well, 'nuff from me. What are some other responses?

From: Jeanne H. Simpson; Thu, 21 May 1992  
15:39:46 CDT  
Subject: Re: Valerie's manifesto

Ok, I hauled myself over to the library and read the article in CCC. I am humbled to see my name in it. It's scary to find things you said long ago coming back to—not haunt but surprise you. Thanks Valerie.

I agree that more ought to be done to get writing centers out of second class citizenship. But I think the wrong approach is being suggested.

First, yelling, screaming, PROTESTING is not effective rhetoric. Not for money. And money equals status on today's campuses, because it equals survival. Speaking as an administrator, I will tell you that being yelled at does not make me generous. It may make me attentive, but not necessarily as desired. Not to sound threatening—anyone who knows me will tell you that I am not Attila the Hun.

Well, to the point. As long as writing centers and their directors think only in terms of the English department, they'll get nowhere. Doing so confirms exactly what Valerie talks about: the supplemental role

for centers. Thinking of centers as part of an English department is in fact to define one's self as supplemental. But writing centers are NOT a departmental service....They are actually INSTITUTIONAL services that can and should serve the whole institution. Directors should think that way, aim that way, prepare that way, persuade that way, participate in the institution's activities that way.

I think we should do less complaining about how unappreciated we are and stop butting our heads against an obstacle that is not just immovable but largely irrelevant. The one common criterion that institutions will apply in determining budget priorities these days will be simple: how central is program X to the mission of the university/college/etc? The thing to do, then, is to become central to the mission.

From: Wilkie Leith; Thu, 28 May 1992  
16:39:00 EST  
Subject: Valerie, Jeanne, Mickey, etc.

I...agree with Jeanne that writing centers should view themselves as institutional centers even though they may reside in English departments. But I don't remember encountering too many centers that don't ALREADY view themselves that way. The problem...is that the administrators themselves do little to bring centers into the institutional ring (Jeanne is the terrific exception).

From: Jeanne H. Simpson; Mon, 1 Jun 1992  
10:57:06 CDT  
Subject: Re: Valerie, Jeanne, Mickey, etc.

[My] method involved attending the council and committee meetings that addressed curricular issues. I attended faithfully, never mind the time I was NOT in the writing center taking care of things there. I spoke up whenever possible with helpful (I hope) information....This got the center into minutes, which administrators do read....The job of clarifying what the center does is never over, never complete, never adequate.

From: Jeanne H. Simpson; Tue, 2 June 1992  
10:46:00 CDT  
Subject: Re: Thanks/more thoughts

I had a professor at Illinois State who gave me some excellent advice: when you want to do something new, interesting, vital, etc., figure out who would benefit and how IF YOU FAIL. In other words, identify your opponents and their motives before you start. Would somebody look bad? Would somebody be expected to use the money instead of getting an allocation that is now more or less guaranteed?

I guess I'm urging you (and the rest of the gang) to STOP thinking you are regarded as second class somehow. What gets ignored, shuffled, etc. is as likely to be a threat as it is likely to be not good. If you think of yourself as a victim, you will act like one. Think of yourself as a winner, as an educational leader (writing center directors are definitely that). Folks that have good plans ready to go are folks that eventually get the plans adopted.

And my last comment is this: don't give up on a good idea. The one thing that works in higher education is dogged persistence.

From: Mickey Harris; Tue, 2 Jun 1992  
14:16:47 EST  
Subject: Re: Thanks/more thoughts

I just got done reading more of Jeanne's sane advice. I tend to read her words very carefully—almost like marching orders. I just want to second one of her approaches/truisms: "The one thing that works in higher education is dogged persistence."

Tenacity is my most successful approach. I whine, hang on, repeat, hang around and ask again, and in general succeed occasionally by wearing "them" down....Our previous department head, a male, used to duck into the men's room at the very sight of me. But eventually, he had to come out, and there I was....[This method] isn't foolproof, and people tend to go on auto-pilot when I start in again (their eyes actually glaze over like they are comatose—probably are), but lots of talk, followed by written requests, followed by more written stuff. . .you get the idea.

From: Jeanne H. Simpson; Tue, 2 Jun 1992  
14:54:16 CDT  
Subject: Re: Thanks/more thoughts

Mickey,  
I have laughed for half an hour, envisioning you lurking outside the men's room as you wait to hassle your chair....And you are the kind of nice lady it is impossible to be rude to, a quality I hope you use to shameless advantage.

Thanks for the smile.

From: Joyce Kinkead; Tue 2 Jun 1992  
15:38:00 MDT  
Subject: Re: Thanks/more thoughts

Mickey and Jeanne:  
On tenacity.

This year I was given an "Attila the Hun Leadership Calendar" by a colleague/friend; I laughed at first, but some of the "Attilaisms" have been very appropriate. I offer the following one: "Tenacity—the quality of unyielding drive to accomplish assignments is a desirable and essential quality of leadership. The weak persist only when things go their way. The strong persist and pursue through discouragement, deception, and even personal abandonment. Pertinacity is often the key to achieving difficult assignments or meeting challenging goals."

From: Mickey Harris; Tue, 2 Jun 1992  
22:09:15 EST  
Subject: Re: Thanks/more thoughts

Jeanne,  
Glad to read that I raised some giggles. The local population, however, must have long since written me off as a weirdo pervert, hanging around outside men's rooms. Now that we have a female department head, I get to wait outside her stall. Progress!

## Building a Community of Writers in a Required Lab: A Paradox and a Dilemma

When writers talk to writers, they learn from one another. In a writing center, this conversation results in real learning because the process starts where the learner is and goes where the learner wants to go (North 442). The problem is getting a center full of learners who consider themselves writers. Traditional writing center wisdom teaches that to reach this ideal, centers should be voluntary and avoid the stigma of remediation.<sup>1</sup> At Massachusetts Bay Community College, we broke both those rules. In breaking them, we have been able to bring about a student-centered learning environment that comes very close to the model North described in "The Idea of a Writing Center." At the same time, though, we are conscious that the experience a student undergoes in a writing center may not be complete because issues of authority can interfere with the fullness of the collaborative experience.

At Mass Bay, four hundred students a semester enroll in Writing 100, a college-level but pre-freshman English course. Those students also enroll in Writing Lab 100, a one-credit course that requires them to spend an hour a week in lab. After experimenting with models ranging from students spending their hour at word processors to students meeting in groups to discuss the qualities of good writing, we settled on an open lab modeled on a drop-in writing center. We found that when we forced students to attend, we got the benefits of a voluntary program.

The result came from making students responsible for their own activity in lab. In other words, we began authoritatively, outlining specific requirements students had to meet; then we let go, allowing students to decide what to do while meeting those requirements. A student can spend an hour working alone at a computer or can join a group to collaborate on a project or engage in peer editing. Students can talk to a facilitator or, if they wish, sit and stare at the ceiling. Despite its involuntary structure, students have turned the lab into a place where they determine the pace and direction of the learning that occurs.

Although we anticipated normal student opposition to a required lab, we did not anticipate that, by the end of the semester, nearly every student would say the lab was a good experience. More importantly, in a final survey, 74% said they would continue to use the lab beyond their required semester. Not only have many of them become regular visitors to the lab, but some have volunteered to work with other students on writing. In addition, a number of students from classes other than writing are making regular use of the lab.

The amount of collaboration in our model is one of our most reliable indicators of success. Before the end of the first semester, the lab had become a place where students freely helped each other in the writing process. If a person got stuck while on the computer, usually she would lean over and ask the writer in the next carrel for help. Almost every hour, we recorded multiple incidents of collaboration: two or more students sharing a computer, groups sitting together discussing papers, and students, while waiting to talk to facilitators, turning to other students to work out their problems on their own.

As the first semester progressed, the role of the professional staff became less significant. Both the collaboration that occurred and the diminishing role of the professional facilitator were by design. The philosophy that informs our lab is that writing is not something you teach. James Paul Gee has observed that traditional teaching, when applied to the concept of literacy, enables the learner to talk about literacy, not have it. Literacy, Gee asserts, is acquired, not learned, and one acquires it by practicing with others who already have it (23). We in writing centers know that students learn from collaboration and that collaborative learning works best among peers. But even when collaboration occurs, it is seldom as complete as it can be.

Collaboration between student and teacher is not true collaboration as long as the student-teacher relationship is dominant. For full



collaboration, *everyone* who enters a writing center must be seen as a colleague. Each person brings to the process of collaboration diverse knowledge and ability that only that person can bring. The result is a synergistic interaction that not only enables students to write better, but makes them confident in that ability. They are willing to take chances, willing to share more often, and willing to challenge "authority." But the very nature of a writing center's place in academe creates a dilemma. If the process of interaction begins where the student is, then the fact that a student sees a "teacher" as an authority must be taken into account.

When students talk to teachers, they don't learn what they want to learn, they learn what they think the teacher wants. The problem doesn't disappear when the consultant is a tutor. By being identified as the person to turn to for help, the tutor is invested with a degree of authority. Thus, students often enter into conversations with tutors with much the same attitude as they do with teachers.

If the writing center is to be a community of writers, then *everyone* there needs to be seen as a writer. A comment a student made while working on a paper about ways of seeing indicates our problem. Leo, who uses the lab an average of four hours every week, gave the following example while talking to a facilitator: "When we both look at Kristin [another facilitator], we each see a young woman with blond hair and glasses. But when I look at her, I see a teacher, and you most likely see a peer." Our dilemma is how do we enable Leo to look at Kristin and see a peer, another writer, who perhaps has a little more expertise but who struggles with the same kinds of issues he struggles with when she sits down to write.

What is needed is a device for building a community where people "see" themselves as writers with varying degrees of skill and expertise. Only when a student sees a teacher as another writer and the teacher sees the student the same way can collaborative arrangements extend in all directions. But building communities takes time; they can not be forced into existence. Or can they?

At Mass Bay we have undertaken several initiatives to speed up the process of community building. In each initiative, we have started by being directive and then, as soon as

possible, let go. Our most promising initiative is a group known as Core Writers. Core Writers is a group of people (students, faculty and staff) who get together to talk about writing. To be a member, one simply has to consider oneself a writer. A Core writer is identifiable because he or she wears a button that says "I am a writer." If a Core member is in the lab and doesn't want to talk to another person about writing, then the member doesn't wear a button. There are no strings attached to being part of the Core—no time commitments or work commitments. Core members do what they want, because they are colleagues and have choices.

As members of the Core, we have instigated some projects dealing with writing to enable students to take an active role in using writing for something besides getting grades. We have,

***For full collaboration,  
everyone who enters a  
writing center must be  
seen as a colleague.***

for instance, started a literary magazine open to all members of the college community and edited by student members of the CORE. We publish a biweekly newsletter about the Core. One major feature in the letter is a student essay that has no purpose other than to share what the student has done. And we have invited Core members to share controversial pieces of writing in an open forum where the ideas presented can be discussed.

Leo is a Core member. His attitude in the second semester has shown a dramatic change. When he was offered the position of editor of the literary magazine, he took it. When we began the planning stages with him, he made suggestions. When we advertised the magazine in a Core newsletter, he *demand*ed we present it a certain way. He is now more inclined to consider the professionals working in the lab as colleagues. For him, Kristin is becoming a peer.

Have we found Utopia? No. Collaboration happens in the lab between student and stu-

dent, and it happens among Core members. But too many in the lab still see themselves as students, not writers, and see the staff as teachers, not equals. If we are to have the kind of place we envision, then we need help from our "other community," the people who deal with this same issue every day.

All of us who work in writing centers need to collaborate in addressing this dilemma. In this paper, we have offered some suggestions of ways to complete the process of turning a writing center into a community of writers, but still, we need to know what goes on in other centers. We need to aggressively seek alternatives that will enable us to break down the traditional barriers of authority, and the best way to do this is through an expanded dialogue in the literature, at conferences, and through personal contacts aimed at making the Utopia a reality.

Seven years ago in *College English*, Stephen North described the writing center as a place where writers talk to writers. Five years later, at the spring meeting of the Midwest Writing Center Association, Andrea Lundsford said that writing centers are at the heart of a revolution in education. By its nature, our work subverts the traditional curriculum and redefines the position of authority in the learning process. Our goal is to create communities where learning takes place because learners, not teachers or curricula, make it happen and where old walls that shut teachers in offices and keep student waiting on the outside simply dissolve.

Joseph Saling and  
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Massachusetts Bay Community College  
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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In her article on avoiding conflict of expectations, Karen Rodis identifies three important characteristics that need to be structured into the design of a writing center. First, the center should not be promoted as a remedial center. Second, attendance should be voluntary. Third, centers should be staffed by professionals (56).

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[Ed. note: In a letter accompanying this manuscript, Joseph Saling wrote the following:]

In addition to the activities we described in the paper, Core Writers this year sponsored a "Poetry Rally" to demonstrate the need for support of higher education in this state of Massachusetts. The rally attracted more than thirty nationally recognized poets who read their work to over one hundred people at the end of the spring semester. In addition, we had a number of our own students read at the rally and we also received endorsements from over sixty additional poets, including Seamus Heaney and Allen Ginsberg. I mention the rally here to show what can happen when authority is shared in the writing center. One of our Core Writers has joined us in proposing a session for the national peer tutoring conference that will focus on how basic writing students can develop into "writing activists."

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## The USW Method

A great number of students find it difficult to answer essay questions or form a thesis statement. The USW Method can significantly lessen the difficulty and allow a student to develop clear thesis statements in response to any essay question that might be asked of them. USW stands for Use the Same Words, since this is precisely what you do when you use the method.

The USW theory is quite simple. The method teaches the student to incorporate the

essay question into the answer. Doing this forces the student to think about the question and ultimately answer it. But most importantly, the method gives the student the question to answer in the first place. Many times students misunderstand the question and answer everything except the question that is asked. The problem for these students is finding the question and the thesis statement to answer it. However, if students apply the USW Method, it will be impossible for them to fall into this trap, since they will use most of the same words in the question to form the thesis statement. The question and the manner of answering it is not as obvious as many teachers believe.

Following are some examples that demonstrate the USW Method in action: "What are some of the heroic characteristics displayed by Beowulf?" "Some heroic characteristics displayed by Beowulf are courage, loyalty, generosity and strength," or "Beowulf displayed the heroic characteristics of courage, loyalty, generosity and strength." One should note that

almost all of the words from the question were used in forming and making the thesis statement. Another example of the USW Method is the response to the question. "How did the setting help support the theme of the story?" "The setting helped support the theme of the story through the use of contrast." Again one can't help but notice that most of the words from the question are used in the response or thesis statement.

This method has not always had a name. It has been around for a long time; it is not new but it has been forgotten. That is a shame because it works and should be used to help ease the horror of finding thesis statements and answering essay questions. I found this method helpful and important enough to deserve a name, so I gave it one—the USW Method.

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