....from the editor....

If you suffer from lack of space in your writing lab, perhaps you'll sympathize with our problems in trying to store back volumes of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Things are getting desperately crowded, and the only solution is to offer back issues on a special sale to reduce our supply (and regain some bookshelf space that our lab needs). On page 8 you'll find a notice which explains that while we normally charge $20 per volume, for the next six months, we're having a "half price" sale, at $10 per volume. Since we have no billing procedures, we can only accept prepaid orders (that is, with checks enclosed). The issues go back to volume 2 (1977-78), and we have complete volumes through to volume 16 (1991-92). In the near future, we also hope to have an index to past issues available, but for now, all we can offer are stacks of past volumes.

As the holidays approach, I wish us all peace, some high quality R&R, and continued appreciation for all that our tutors accomplish.
•Muriel Harris, editor

Pluralism and Its Discontents: Tutor Training in a Multicultural University

Walking through the halls of Portland State University and wandering through the green pathways on our urban campus, one sees people from many cultures and hears many languages. Of all the universities in Oregon, PSU has the greatest multicultural diversity.

The writing center at PSU annually serves 1,500 students in 2,000 hours over a period of nine months. Half our students are non-native speakers of Oriental languages. Some of them came here as children or young adults after the Vietnam War. Many also arrive every year from Japan, Taiwan, mainland China, Indonesia, and (in lesser numbers) from the Middle East and Western Europe to study for a year or two. Quite a few of our international students are in graduate programs in the social and physical sciences.

Our paid tutors are graduate students in English;

they study literature and rhetorical and critical theory. They love fiction and poetry; some learn to love epistemology. All their lives they have been praised for their language skills. Some ought not to have been praised so much, but nonetheless they are language lovers, their mouths filled with metaphor, midnight writers sensitive to language, honers of their own stylistic niceties. Very few have experience or interest in linguistics or ESL. Very few have formal grammatical training; their own grammar has always sufficed for their own papers.

In addition, most tutors work in the writing center for only one term in their two-year program. Since many tutors plan to teach, either in community colleges or in universities, they seldom elect to tutor for more than one term, preferring to teach classes in freshman composition for the experience and for vita enhancement.

The Problem

These two disparate groups—non-native speakers and tutors—need to work productively together, and for four years they did. Tutor training was minimal and informal because tutors caught on quickly. We role-played and read from Muriel Harris's *Tutoring Writing* and from Meyer and Smith's *The Practical Tutor*. We also read and discussed Stephen North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" and other articles. The tutors were eager to help non-native speakers and enjoyed what they saw as a window on other worlds. Most tutors even learned some grammatical nomenclature so that they could communicate better with students who knew traditional grammatical rules but were inconsistent in applying them.

Last spring, however, three tutors were visibly and vocally unhappy about working so many hours with non-native speakers. Two of them complained frequently and persisted in appropriating the texts of non-native speakers despite many conferences with other staff members and with me. However, these two complained generally about the graduate program and seemed allergic to work. After attempting to raise their tutoring consciousness, I settled for the misery of waiting them out. I wasn't happy to have them on the staff, but five more weeks and the cast would change.

However, the third tutor who grumbled about working with non-native speakers was

excellent—good in the classroom and much respected in the writing center. A warm, intelligent, and hard-working young woman, she joined her voice to the others in blaming the difficulty of her job on non-native speakers. She felt that without any technical background in ESL she was expected to do the impossible.

I had to recognize that our writing center had a problem.

Analysis of the Problem

But the problem was not strictly a lack of information or tutorial expertise. Yes, tutors can always use more information—about writing as well as ESL issues—but that information was available to them from the center's resource file and books. It was also available to them from resource people if the tutors chose to seek answers to their questions.

Part of the problem stemmed from the tutors' anxiety toward the end of the term about their own graduate projects. They were all first-year graduate students who had had a long, hard year and were struggling to write "A" papers in difficult classes at the same time that they were tutoring fifteen hours a week. They had been taught about collaborative learning in the center and in the composition seminar; they

paid lip service to it as an ideal but retained their old habits of private, solitary writing—midnight writers—because they were under so much pressure. (I think that we all do this—regress to serviceable old methods like writing the perfect zero draft—when pressed for time and emotionally stressed.) Symptomatically, the tutors were unwilling to tutor each other, seeing it as a waste of precious time and as an ungraded exercise.

Part of the problem also derived from their unrealistic expectations. They were still very much product-oriented, wanting their students' papers to be error-free, to be the kinds of papers that they themselves were struggling to write.

And part of the problem was also the writing center's appointment schedule, which had always been in half-hour blocks. This meant that for two hours at a clip a tutor could see four students. Switching gears so quickly under such time pressure, with students pressing tutors to get through the whole paper, was difficult although tutors in the past had not voiced any objections.

With half our tutoring staff expressing hostility towards half the students we served, spring term did not go well. I did what I could to give tutors time off, to help them with their own papers, to discuss unrealistic expectations, to bring in guest speakers from the ESL program. This year I've added more training sessions and changed the schedule to hour-long appointments, and these changes have been helpful.

Helpful, but not perhaps enough. My solution had been to alleviate some pressure and to provide more information. Ideally, we need more time for training, specifically a course geared toward composition theory and its relation to tutoring, but we probably will not get that for years. Yet beyond ad hoc solutions and long-range planning, I am still deeply shocked by the scapegoating. Why did people who normally have empathy with strangers in a strange land, who had taught with pleasure Rodriguez and Freire, choose to scapegoat students from other countries?

Another Way of Looking at the Problem

On further analysis, I believe that there is another way to view the problem.

At PSU, that walk through campus yields a superficial response—ah, what multicultural diversity. We don't see *writers* at every possible stage of joining the university's intellectual community. Instead, we characterize people in the same old ways—there's a black one (how nice to see at least one black face on campus in a city with a large black community) and five white ones (like me, but oh so young) and two who look Micronesian (how exotic) and there are four Japanese (how serious they are) and, oh, yes, I think that group over there is Vietnamese or Cambodian, the young men fierce in their sharply creased tight black pants.

This categorizing—stereotyping, really—goes on in the writing center too, perhaps as a response to pressure and because of lack of experience; it's easier to stereotype than to differentiate. It took me a long time to see the *writer* in each student, yet I expect my tutors to do that in less than a term, tutors who have never thought about writing except for their own and that of the stars of the literary canon. The stereotyping is also encouraged by my having tutors fill out weekly forms based on native language distinctions. The forms, kept for administrative reasons, draw attention to this gross sorting mechanism.

Yet native speakers have much the same writing problems as non-native speakers because both groups are writing formal English in different disciplines with different perspectives. In actuality, freshmen enrolled in English composition share more similarities than differences with regard to the difficulties of the course, no matter what their first language is.

John from the working-class suburb of Gresham is just as uncommitted to his thesis as is Yukie from Tokyo. Neither knows what stand to take on complex issues; neither thinks student opinion has any value. Both find reading Walker Percy and Adrienne Rich immensely difficult. Both wait for the teacher to tell them what to think. Yukie has trouble with articles, but a good freshman essay does not depend on perfect use of articles.

John may have gotten "C's" in English classes all through high school; he probably has no desire to express himself on paper and thinks writing means getting the forms right, and he'll never know where the commas go. He wants to be a computer engineer with, as he thinks, no need to write.

Yukie was an excellent student in Japan, or she wouldn't be here at all. She also thinks writing means getting the forms right, all the innumerable forms of a foreign language. In the educational system of her country, she was never asked for her opinion on matters of importance. Instead, she was asked to commit other people's ideas to memory. She also does not see a future for herself in writing in any language.

I see this similarity in writing problems also in graduate students whom I tutor. In the social sciences, graduate students are expected to identify a research problem, review the literature and summarize it in their own words, design an experiment, or cut and slash their way through other researchers' experiments and results in order to emerge with their own approach to the problem.

Yet undergraduate programs do not prepare students for this kind of work. I have tutored native and non-native students unable to be as aggressive in their scholarship as their fields demand. I used to think that traditionally brought up Japanese women had more trouble with this concept than American women do, but the more I tutor, the less I can generalize along cultural lines. Robert Kaplan's intercultural patterns may have seemed intuitively right on first reading, but the more I work with students from other cultures, the more I see similarities in writing problems among individuals rather than stereotypical images.

Tokoyo from Japan took a year to go beyond summarizing her sources—and a painful year it was until she forced herself to take a controversial stand. But Luann, the youngest child from a farm family of twelve in the Midwest, had the same problem. Interestingly enough, Luann also had a habit of drafting with morphemes and attaching verb endings to nouns and noun endings to verbs.

These problems have to do with academic writing, a truly strange undertaking for most students. Writing is foreign to them; they live in an oral and video world and read only for information or fantasy. It is worth remembering the title of James Raymond's text—*Writing (Is an Unnatural Act)*. We ourselves are still learning about the writing process and teaching it from a base of partial information.

Even freewriting to generate ideas must

be taught although its name suggests otherwise. Deciding what to use from freewriting must be taught. Thinking about writing as reader-based must be taught. Summarizing, paraphrasing, analyzing, and synthesizing skills must be taught. Most of the activities we ask our students to do in writing classes are different from what they do in their own lives and also in other classes. We encourage our students to take a stand, to be critical of authority, of texts written by professionals, and to take themselves seriously as authorities—as authors.

In addition, each field within the university has its own special perspectives that students need to be aware of. Each field has its own language, its own conceptual strategies, its own ideas of what constitutes a problem, of what counts as evidence. Within each field, there is further diversity. Students need to master their field's perspectives in order to be accepted.

And here is where language theory developed from ESL and applied to basic writers can inform our teaching and tutoring of all writers. The scapegoat can, in fact, save us (as scapegoats ought to do).

Some Theory to the Rescue

The theory of writing as a second language is complex, and I have only recently begun to read beyond the error analysis of Mina Shaughnessy and David Bartholomae. In any case, I could not do justice in a short essay to the full-blown theory it has become. Although usually applied only to basic writers, the theory seems to me a good fit with most students—native and non-native, freshmen and graduates, historians and engineers. An excellent summary of the theory and its practitioners appears in Alice Horning's monograph, *Teaching Writing as a Second Language.*

The theory posits that academic writing is a foreign linguistic system for basic writers. Their difficulties are similar to those of learning a second language. Second language learning involves both *acquisition*, which is largely unconscious though systematic, and *learning*, which is conscious mastery of the rules. Acquisition is more powerful than learning; teachers and tutors can only facilitate acquisition, which is inaccessible to direct teaching. In fact, Stephen Krashen, whose work is some-

what controversial, believes that learning acts only to monitor language acquisition.

The distinction between acquisition and learning seems to me one that tutors will find useful because it accounts for so much that happens in the writing center that is frustrating. On the grammatical level, for example, it accounts for the persistence of subject-verb agreement errors of both native and non-native speakers even though they can state the rule. In a larger sense, it accounts for the inability of tutors to teach critical reading directly. Tutors can only facilitate critical reading and thinking by asking questions, encouraging the student, and modeling the process.

According to the theory, errors are essential to acquisition and, unlike mistakes, occur systematically. Errors are productive when the teacher or tutor responds positively to them, looks for patterns (as both Shaughnessy and Bartholomae have done), and asks the student what rule is being followed. Once an incorrect rule has been identified, the teacher or tutor can help the student replace it with correct information. There is a time to teach rules but not until the tutor knows what rule the student is already using.

Error may come from misunderstanding the rules or not using them. Variable performance comes about when students have learned but not acquired the rules or from fossilization of error. Thus error analysis is a primary tool in the writing center; tutors need to be better trained in it. Error also comes about when students don't leave enough time for editing and paying attention to form. The finding is supported by Bartholomae's work with a student who, when reading aloud, corrected many of his written errors. As Krashen says, learning is a monitor. Bartholomae's student and our students in the writing center need help in employing the monitor.

Error may also come about because of affective psychosocial factors. Students may not wish to be immersed in a foreign linguistic system that alienates them from their native culture. They may resist, and with good reason, as Richard Rodriguez makes clear. Learning the ways of academia means alienation from their background, whether from the inner city of Portland, the suburbs of Gresham, or the high-rises of Tokyo.

Does this theoretical perspective sound right for the writing center? Haven't we always encouraged tutors to ask questions, to have students read aloud, to look at the larger picture and see past every niggling mistake? Haven't we always encouraged tutors to help students with the writing process and not to feel responsible for the final product's perfection?

As a theory, writing as a second language accounts for much of what we already do in the writing center. Shaughnessy and Bartholomae awakened us to the virtues of error analysis, but now we have a powerful, elegant, and integrative theory from ESL to adapt to our purposes. We know it works for basic writers. I think that we need to test it in more detail and apply it to many more writers. And we might well focus our tutors' learning on this theory.

Katya Amato
Portland State University
Portland, OR

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Call for Presentations

Brown University Writing Fellows Program

10th Anniversary Conference

April 16-17, 1993
Providence, RI

"Peer Tutoring and the Writing Process: The Next Ten Years"

We invite proposals for 45-minute presentations from writing specialists, peer tutors, and other interested educators. Proposals due Jan. 11, 1993: Writing Fellows Program, Box 1962, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912. For further information, contact Professor Rhoda Flaxman, Director (401)-863-1404.

Announcement and Call for Proposals

5th Annual Conference of the Writing Tutorial Programs

Feb. 6, 1993
New York City, NY

"Writing and Social Responsibility"

We invite a variety of proposals: 60-minute workshops, demonstrations, and panel discussions; 15-minute presentations or papers separately submitted or combined into a 60-minute session. Deadline: December 11, 1992. Send or FAX to Gretchen Haynes, Writing Center, L318, Queensborough Community College, Bayside, NY 11364-1497; FAX 718-428-0802; for information 718-631-6262: G. Haynes.

9th Conference on Computers and Writing

Ann Arbor, Michigan
May 20-23, 1993

"Lessons from the Past, Learning for the Future"

For further information, contact Computers and Writing Conference, English Composition Board, 1025 Angell Hall, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109 (e-mail: Computers_and_Writing@um.cc.umich.edu)

Call for Papers
for
Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers
Association Conference

March 13, 1993
Villanova, PA

"Conversations about Writing: Faculty, Peer Tutors and Students"

Keynote speaker: Elaine Maimon

One-page proposals for papers, workshops, or panel discussions should be sent by February 1, 1993 to Dr. Karyn Hollis, English Department, Villanova University, Villanova, PA 19085 (215-645-7872).

Announcement and
Call for Proposals

12th Annual Penn State
Conference
on Rhetoric and Composition

July 7-10, 1993
State College, PA

Scholars, researchers, and teachers of rhetoric and writing are invited to participate in the conference by presenting papers, demonstrations, or workshops in any relevant topic—rhetorical history or theory, the composing process, basic writing, writing in academic and non-academic contexts, advanced composition, writing across the curriculum, computers and writing, and so on. To receive the conference brochure, to submit a proposal (proposals accepted through April 5, 1993), to volunteer to chair a session, or to find out more about the conference, contact Davida Charney, Dept. of English, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802
(E-Mail: IRJ@PSUVM.PSU.EDU)

Call for Proposals

9th Annual Conference for
High Schools and Colleges
of the
New England Writing Centers
Association

April 17, 1993
Burlington, Vermont

"Reopening the Dialogue"

Keynote speaker: Muriel Harris

Proposals are invited for one-hour workshops, panel discussions, and other interactive forums for administrators, high school centers, college centers, and/or peer tutors. Possible topics include communication between writing centers and the larger community, between high schools and colleges, between writing centers and the academy; defining our mission; electronic communication technology; diversity; mainstream and nontraditional pedagogies; and writing centers as leaders, followers, and collaborators. Please mail proposals to the NEWCA Steering Committee Chair: Leone Scanlon, Writing Center, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610-1477. Proposal deadline: Dec. 4, 1992.

Palm Springs Writers Conference

April 2-4, 1993
Palm Springs, CA

The featured speaker is Dean R. Koontz. Also on the faculty are Ray Bradbury, Roderick Thorpe (author of DIE HARD), Gerald Petievich (author of TO LIVE AND DIE IN L.A.), Arthur Lyons, Robert Crals, Julie Smith, and other authors, agents, and editors. For information, phone 619-864-9410 or FAX 619-322-1833.

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 Johanek, English Department, and Laura Helms, Learning Center, University College, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306

March 13: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Villanova, PA
Contact: Karyn Hollis, English Department, Villanova University, Villanova, PA 19085

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

October 14-16: Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association, in Denver, CO
Contact: M. Clare Sweeney, English Department, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287

Half-Price Sale!

Complete volumes of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* will be on half-price sale, at $10/volume, from Dec. 1, 1992 to May 31, 1993. After May 31, the price returns to the regular $20/volume. For sale are volume 2 (1977-78) through volume 16 (1991-92). PREPAYMENT REQUIRED. Send checks (made payable to Purdue University) to *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Dept. of English, 1356 Heavilon Hall, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356.

Call for Papers

Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association Conference

October 14-16, 1993
Denver, Colorado

You are invited to submit proposals for individual presentations (approx. 20 minutes) exploring topics such as planning and administering writing centers, innovative writing center programs, computers in the writing center, the affective domain in writing center instruction, new directions in writing center/writing across the curriculum programs, and tutoring ESL students. Other topics are welcome. Send 300-word proposals by March 1, 1993 to M.Clare Sweeney, Ph. D., 2625 College Avenue South, Tempe, AZ 85282-2344.

For sale: A Collection of Tutors' Stories

When Tutor Meets Student: Experiences in Collaborative Learning, a book of stories written by writing tutors can be ordered from MM Associates, Box 2857, Kensington, MD 20891 (phone 301-530-5078). (Price: $10.00 a copy, plus $3.10 p & h)

Call for Manuscripts

Stories From the Center: Meg Woolbright and Lynn Briggs seek essays of 15-25 pages for an edited volume of theoretically-based narratives about interactions between tutors and students in writing centers. The editors welcome stories that consider how we construct ourselves and are constructed by our conversations in writing centers. Manuscripts that explore personal and professional images are particularly welcome. Send inquiries and abstracts by June 1, 1993; completed manuscripts by September 1, 1993 to Meg Woolbright, The Writing Center, Siena College, 515 Loudon Road, Loudonville NY 12211 or to Lynn Briggs, Reading/Language Arts, 170 Huntington Hall, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244.

Tutors' Column

Nothing To Fear But Fear Itself

Anxiety. Trepidation. Doubt. Qualms. Apprehension. Phobia. All these words are inadequate synonyms for the word which best describes the writing center tutor's predominant state of being: fear.

Fear is the condition or emotion that throughout every aspect of our lives we find ourselves confronted with. For example, I fear that people will ignore what I am saying in this article and only notice that I ended a sentence with a preposition, *with.* But that fear is a trivial one and will not trouble me for long. Other fears, however, have a way of returning again and again, and one of these is the fear of being a tutor. Of course, that sentence calls for some slight modifications: The fear is not of being a tutor, it is of being a *bad* tutor, or worse, an inadequate tutor. If I were afraid of tutoring, obviously I would not do it. The fear of finding that I may be unable to help someone who has placed his confidence and trust in me can never be wholly vanquished. But this fear does not have to be a crippling one. Instead, I choose to look at fear as an aid, not an ailment.

Around the Writing Center in which I tutor, I am often referred to as "The Old Man." This title has been given me not because I am aged or senile, but because I have been tutoring for four years, my entire undergraduate career. There are no books, no audio-visual programs, no computer programs, no posters on the wall that I am not well acquainted with. (There I go again!) In fact, because I know some materials quite well, I sometimes believe I helped write them—a few of which I actually did. Yet, as calm and controlled as I appear to both my fellow tutors and my tutees, when a student walks in, I still experience the same gut-wrenching queasiness as I did when my first tutee came in and said, "Hi, I'm David. Can you help me write a paper?" If my throat had not been so constricted, I would have screamed, long and loud. (Who *was* I to think I could help someone else do something I struggled through myself?) Now, after four

years of training and experience, I say, "Who *am* I to think I can help? . . ." Well, you get the idea. But fear is something that I not only have to conquer in order to be successful but also have to be able to use effectively.

As a competitor in speech tournaments, I have learned to channel my inevitable nervousness into energy, into thinking, into something useful. This same exercise can apply to tutoring. For one thing, if I am as energetic as a wet rag, my tutee will become interested in the wood grain of the wall and not in my advice, even if what I say may be useful. A tutee will listen to me if I seem interested and attentive, even if I am sometimes doing so only to avoid thinking how sick I am feeling. Also, as I consider the various details of English composition, my mind races through everything it can in order to save my . . . reputation. I am always surprised when I realize that I know more than I thought I did and that some of what I know may actually help my tutee. Finally, and most importantly, if I get nervous and a little shaky, this response shows that I care about the student. As long as I am willing to put pressure on myself to help someone else, I will remain a tutor who is concerned and sincere.

Obviously, anxiety, like anything else, can be taken to an extreme. What I as a tutor should learn to do is moderate my fear. If I can direct it into an offensive rather than a defensive reaction, both my tutee and I will see the difference. Gaining control over fear is a never-ending job, but, as a tutor's confidence grows, the time will come when a student walks in with a blank paper and asks that dreaded question, and the tutor will reply, without stuttering too much, "Of course, I can help you." Fear then becomes another component of the complete tutor.

Todd M. Lidh
Troy State University
Troy, Alabama

VOICES FROM THE NET
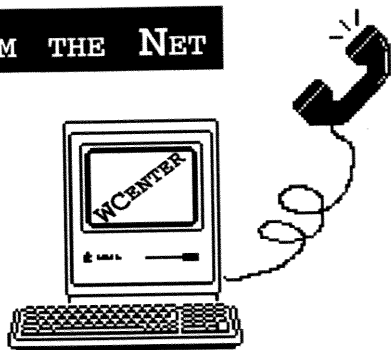
---ERIC CRUMP

Lifting the Veil from Writing Anxiety

A professor once told me that he would not encourage poets to visit our writing center because he thought we tried to demystify the writing process, and that sense of mystery was something he wanted to foster. I come from a creative writing background, so at first I was inclined to agree with his attempt to veil the process in awe, but as the excerpts from WCenter* below indicate, mystery often involves debilitating fear and trepidation. The magic of wonder seems less wonderful when it contributes to anguish. Every semester writers motivated by paralyzing anxiety find their way to writing centers. They don't believe they are writers.

Earlier this fall, Muriel Harris introduced the subject on the list, wondering if there were more anxiety-ridden writers visiting writing centers than in the past and why little is said or written publicly about the problem. The discussion quickly turned to speculation about the causes of writing anxiety, ways writing programs and writing centers contribute to the problem and ways we might address the situation.

The comments below are excerpts (edited for length) from the online conversation.

From: Muriel Harris, Thu, 17 Sep 1992
        13:37:14
Subject: intimidated students

The freshpersons dragging themselves into our Writing Lab during the first few weeks of this semester seem even more intimidated than ever. They are drenched in

writing anxiety, fearful that they have massive spelling problems if they misspell a word, expect devastating comments from teachers, insist on opening tutorials with "I know I'm a lousy writer/I can't write/this draft is terrible/the teacher won't like this/I can't figure out what I'm supposed to do and wouldn't know how to do it even if I did" and so on. What's going on? This year it seems as if we have hit a new rock-bottom low in student writing anxiety.

Eric (Crump) says: "This may be rationalizing on my part, but I've convinced myself that easing writing anxiety is not only as important as talking about writing, it IS talking about writing. A student's emotional stance towards the task either enables or prevents engagement with the task, in my humble amateur psychoanalyst opinion. The question that troubles me is : How do these kids GET in this state?"

Why do we keep this side of what we do hidden from view, like a dirty little secret we don't want those in power to know about? Writing anxiety is real, needs tending, and needs to come out of the closet more so that we can deal with it openly—and maybe even trade suggestions for how to work with such students?

From: Joel Nydahl, Thu, 17 Sep 1992 15:5:00
Subject: Re: intimidated students

Mickey, I don't think we should treat this problem like dirty laundry; it should be aired. The student attitudes that Eric describes must, in part, come from contact with faculty. I, in fact, have heard faculty browbeat writers and privately talk about them in terms that make me angry. We need to let faculty know that writing anxiety in students may result from faculty attitudes that are exhibited openly. This kind of behavior needs to be addressed openly so it can be changed. Got to go now.

From: Jeanne H. Simpson, Thu, 17 Sep 1992
        15:15
Subject: Re: intimidated students

Mickey, Eric, WCENTER,
I remember this problem of intimidated students—I had one who would NOT write more than her name for the first three weeks of class. Any pressure from me at all

resulted in tears. Turned out she was quite competent, just browbeaten—I would not vouch for my own behavior if I ever get hold of the teacher responsible. Where does this phenomenon originate and what to do? I hate to raise a scary possibility but here one is. The inattentive can misinterpret the existence of WAC as a reason to impose "higher standards." I recall a WAC workshop I conducted in which at least one participant just did NOT get it—kept complaining about how long it already took to "correct" his students' dismal term papers. And I got this song-and-dance even after an ENTIRE DAY of workshopping on WAC principles.

From: James C. McDonald, Thu, 17 Sep 1992 16:48
Subject: Re: intimidated students

For the last few years I've been starting my writing classes by assigning students to write their first essay on their images of themselves as writers. Many students...are surprised and thrown at having to write an assignment in which they must think of themselves as writers—they usually say they've never considered themselves writers before and often write that they aren't writers. The assignment tells them that at least I consider them writers. I don't know whether that's comforting or intimidating to know; maybe it's both.

From: Kathy McManus, Fri, 18 Sep 1992 15:26
Subject: Re: intimidated students

Everyone,
In our start-up session for the semester we (the tutors and I) were talking about intimidated students. We always see students early in the term because (I think) they are entering an unfamiliar setting. The university is larger than the small communities they come from and they are no longer part of a group but are thrown in with strangers. I think some of the anxiety stems from people talking about writing more than they did. And some high school teachers may have become more punitive as markers in the past few years because they've had to become "accountable."

From: John Dinan, Fri, 18 Sep 1992 16:34
Subject: Re: intimidated students

Mickey—I met this morning with my new tutors to discuss our first week in the WC. They were very attuned to the variety of troublesome attitudes some (by no means all) of their student-writers had, ranging from "I'll never get this" to "I hope this is what she wants." Interestingly, they responded almost instinctively by chatting "like human beings" w/ their students for awhile, playing against the "This is a tutor and tutors always tell me what's wrong with me one way or another" pre-conception. That was good. Ultimately, though, the work begins, and it's going to be in the doing of that work that these negative attitudes will be reinforced or changed to something more generative. What they have in their hands when they leave the WC is probably the most persuasive demonstration to them that they *can* do it after all—provided, of course, that they feel *they* did most of the work.

From: Cindy Johanek, Fri, 18 Sep 1992 12:28
Subject: intimidated students

Student anxiety in writing situations seems to be such a large, universal problem—the solutions we can offer, however, seem to attend to small fragments of the problem. One of those is trying to get students to see themselves as "writers," as Jim McDonald suggested and has tried in his classroom. In writing centers, we sometimes debate about whether to call students "students," "clients," "tutees," etc. Let's call them "writers" amongst ourselves (which would probably change our own perception) and when we speak to them—let's see what happens. I agree with Jim that students don't see themselves as writers. But how many of us call them that?

From: Joe Saling, Mon, 21 Sep 1992 18:35
Subject: student anxiety

Being in a community college, writing anxiety is the norm here. One source of anxiety is the sense that writing is something that is alien to the student's experience. It's what others do, and so since others seem to do it okay, the student can't help but feel the problem is his or her own. When a student sees writing as a "normal" activity, the anxiety seems to dissipate. But that means the student has to somehow realize that she is not the only one who

struggles to do it. Teachers make a big mistake when they don't share their frustration and anxiety over writing with their own students.

After all, we all know that the people who are doing the judging are not necessarily better than the students (nor in some case are they even more knowledgeable). What they are are people who are more powerful. Students have learned to cower in front of them. We've removed the power from the writing lab (or are at least trying to). Students are not given many opportunities to be anything but students, even when they come to the writing lab. When they are our colleagues in the business of pursuing an education, they don't have to measure up to anything arbitrary, nor do we need to try to measure them. They are who they are. We don't have to change them, just let them grow. (If they want to grow)

From: Mary Jane Schramm, Tue, 22 Sep 1992
            13:19
Subject: Re: student anxiety

I think that another way to distinguish "students" and "writers" is that a student's failure is marked by a low grade on a paper (the failure comes from outside) whereas a writer fails because she feels that she didn't communicate. While her decision is usually a result of feedback she receives from readers, she is the one who decides, ultimately, if a failure in communication took place. I think it does come down to the issue of power. Writing centers in particular are places where that authoritarian structure can be removed in an effort to help students think of themselves as writers. I think Cindy's idea of calling them writers is wonderful. (I always hated calling them tutees—the very word sounds demeaning.)

* *WCenter@TTUVM1 is an electronic forum for writing center directors, consultants, and students. It is managed by Fred Kemp, Texas Tech University director of composition.*

Writing Centers as Centers of Controlled Learning, Too

Roxanne Cullen's article, "Writing Centers as Centers of Connected Learning," in the February 1992 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, reflects the popularity of the midwife metaphor for the kind of "facilitative" teaching that often takes place in the writing center. Cullen specifically refers to the description of midwife-teaching in *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Mary Belenky, et al. "Midwife-teachers are the opposite of banker-teachers. While the bankers deposit knowledge in the learner's head, the midwives draw it out" (Belenky 217). The banker-teacher is seen as filling the role of the doctor who anesthetizes a woman during childbirth, thereby making the woman a passive spectator to the birth of her child. The woman "cannot participate actively because she cannot feel the contractions in the uterus. . . . Midwife-teachers do not administer anesthesia. They support their students' thinking, but they do not do the students' thinking for them or expect the students to think as they do" (Belenky 217-18).

Cullen recognizes that "tutors are acutely aware of the vulnerability of the students who come to the Writing Center. Often students come because they fear writing, and on occasion they come because they fear their teacher; they are trying desperately to avoid humiliation" (3). While being a banker-teacher does not commit one to brutalizing students, I agree that using nasty comments on paper and in class to "punish" students for failing to meet the standards of a certain linguistic community is hardly a productive way to teach.

However, I believe the midwife metaphor for lab teaching is naive insofar as it implies that since facilitative teaching does not punish or anesthetize students, it does not deposit knowledge or exert control. Helpful tutoring should certainly be accepting and non-humiliating, but it is precisely because facilitative teaching relies upon positive reinforcement rather than upon punitive measures and because the feeling of "giving birth" is allowed for by the manipulation of the tutor, that midwifery is a most effective means of control—and, hopefully, of instruction.

Belenky makes explicit a common assumption of midwife metaphor users, namely that in

midwife teaching, "the cycle is one of confirmation-evocation-confirmation" (219). However, this is incomplete, for tutors must inevitably "confirm" some "evocations" more strongly than others, resulting in the relative denial of other "evocations." And, not only are students' ideas reinforced differentially, but questions asked of students cannot but have an impact upon the direction and pattern of students' thinking. Intentionally or not, the tutor's questions plant specific ideas and initiate particular patterns of thought. Tutors, then, cannot "support" their students' thinking without becoming partly responsible for the students' thought, and tutors surely encourage students to think as the tutors themselves do. If this were not the case, it would be difficult to see how a tutor could help improve students' writing abilities. For sharing in the thought processes of an effective writer is an important way in which students can learn to write more effectively. And, if the modes of thought used by effective writers are not taken over by the students, they will remain dependent upon someone else to ask opportune questions. As Cullen states, "the student sees that an intelligent adult must reconsider statements, have concepts re-explained to them, use reference materials, and ask others for advice. This is what makes them real models for writing" (3).

B. F. Skinner points out that even Socrates used the midwife metaphor to describe a method of teaching without appearing to exert control: "He pretended to show how an uneducated slave boy could be led to prove Pythagoras' theorem for doubling the square. The boy assented to the steps in the proof, and Socrates claimed he did so without being told—in other words, that he 'knew' the theorem in some sense all along" (85). Yet, "Socrates' slave boy learned nothing; there was no evidence whatever that he could have gone through the theorem by himself afterward" (86). Because Socrates' method here relies upon the incomplete "confirmation-evocation-confirmation" cycle and does not truly allow the boy to share in Socrates' thought processes, no knowledge is deposited and the boy remains dependent upon his "teacher" to ask the proper questions at the proper times. Unlike Socrates, who here controls without becoming a real model, the effective tutor not only draws information out, but also deposits a knowledge of how the information was "facilitated."

This can be difficult to do, as it is the very subtlety of the tutor's control which allows students a more active role in the voicing of ideas and which also obscures the degree to which students are controlled. While the midwife style of teaching allows students a greater feeling of "giving birth" to ideas because students are led to a solution of their problem rather than simply being given a solution, the calculated questioning and encouragement on the part of the tutor are now what cannot be easily felt. Indeed, tutors frequently find that sessions are most productive when the tutors remain conscious of when they or their students lean forward or back in their chair, the position of papers in relation to students, what the best time to ask a question is and how it should be phrased, and many other factors. These provide cues which students themselves may not be conscious of during the session.

Finally, while issues of control in education can be frightening, the individual nature of writing center teaching makes it necessary for us to face these issues squarely. Once we acknowledge the influence we have upon students, we cannot ignore the importance of our responsibilities as models. Nor, as tutors, can we naively adopt a policy of refusing to exercise control over students. For mere "permissiveness" is not, as Skinner points out, a policy; "it is the abandonment of policy, and its apparent advantages are illusory. To refuse control is to leave control not to the person himself, but to other parts of the social and non-social environments" (84). Perhaps by asking students to write not only about the changes they see in their writing, but to write about their interactions with the tutor as well, we can provide a mirror for students to see more clearly how tutors facilitate the birth of new ideas while still allowing students to experience the birth itself.

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Diagramming Connections for Essay Exams

"It's not like I don't study—I do. But something happens to me when I get that blue book....I don't know what, but it's like everything I've studied seeps out of my head. And I'm left with nothing to say on those blank pages." Kim's voice trailed off.

Working with a student struggling with essay exams is a difficult situation for any tutor to face. As the writing isn't usually available during the session, the most you can do is talk in general terms. You may get things "straightened out" in the session, but who knows what'll happen under exam conditions? Even though prewriting strategies are crucial on a thirty-minute exam, the temptation to just start writing before thinking the question through can overwhelm some writers. Staying with one topic, carefully reading the question, understanding how the parts of the question relate to one another, coming up with an outline, and spot checking the writing by returning to the question are all necessary parts of exam writing. But they can't work if the writer doesn't make connections between the material studied and the exam question. In this session with Kim, I used a technique that allowed her to establish the connections she needed before she started writing.

"How are you preparing for these tests?" I asked.

"I jot down the facts I might need from the reading. Stuff like dates, main ideas, quotes and anything that might be on the test. So I know it beforehand. It's just when I read the question it all disappears."

"Do you have any examples?"

"Yeah, I brought in my last test." She pulled out a crumpled sheet and handed it to me.

It was a typical essay test with two choices. "Which one did you do?"

"Well, I started with the first one, but then I couldn't remember which book the quotation was from so I switched to the second. I figured it was easier to compare the two

tribes. But then when I got into it, it seemed too straightforward."

I glanced at the second question. It began with a related theoretical quotation from an expert and wound down to the actual task which, as I looked closer, wasn't to compare and contrast the two tribes, per se, but to do so in light of the expert's theory. "What'd you do about the quote?"

"To be honest, I wasn't sure what it meant, so I left it alone. But I've been to talk with the prof, and I know how it relates now." She shrugged. "Yet I couldn't do it then."

"Sometimes the questions are tricky. There'll be a whole bunch of questions, and yet the actual task will be a statement like 'analyze and support' ."

"Exactly," Kim nodded. "I should have realized that the quotation had something to do with it. Can we look at something else?"

Her professor had given her copies of old exam questions, and she'd brought them with her. I asked her to take the first question and underline those phrases that she felt were the key to the writing task. She immediately caught the words "compare" and "support"; however, she skipped over a name which I didn't recognize but which I could tell was linked to what she needed to compare. After she finished, I asked her why she'd skipped that name. "Oops, missed that," she replied. "Guess I ought to read it through a couple of times. Or more carefully."

Another sample exam question offered her a choice of two topics. In this one, I suggested she go the whole way, actually setting up her answer. We talked about spending several minutes on prewriting before actually starting the essay, and I offered keep an eye on the clock while she worked.

As I watched, she hovered over one question, then the other. After starting both twice, she settled on the second one, developing an outline that read:

1. intro
2. main body
   Daniel
   Job
3. conclusion

Off to the side she'd added "compare"; "trials," "lions?" and "God" formed another list. Seven minutes had gone by when she stopped.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I spent too much time deciding between the two choices," Kim began, "I need to just pick one. But, even if I'd done that, I still couldn't get into the paper. I didn't know where to start. And I did an outline!"

"Did you have any ideas on what you wanted to say?"

"Yeah, I wanted to tell how they had different views on God and then say something about the ways in which their faith was tested. But it doesn't seem like I've got enough to write here."

"Okay, try this." I gave her a scrap piece of paper. "Draw a circle for Daniel and one for Job. Let's start with Job. What do you know about him?"

As she answered I gestured for her to put them on the paper. She came up with these diagrams.
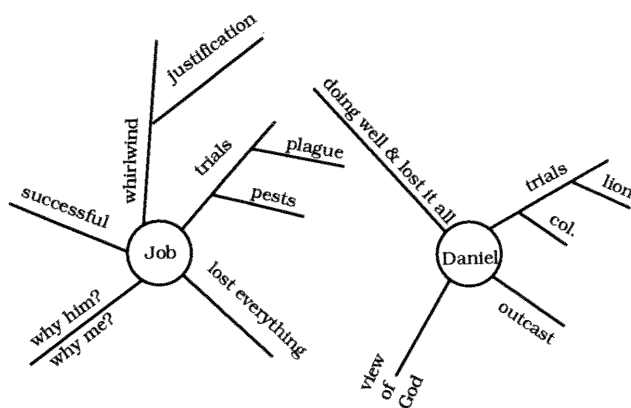
The Job circle sprouted lines, as did the Daniel one. Then Kim stopped. "What now?"

"What's the question say?"

"I'm supposed to make a comparison." As she said it, she drew an arrow between the two circles. "And say something about them, I guess."

"How would you do that?"

She started talking her way around the spokes, attaching numbers to them as she went. " I guess the main thing that I want to talk about is the different views toward God and how they affect the rest of these."

When she finished I said, "It might help you if boiled that down into some sort of sentence at the bottom of the page."

"Hey! I've got a thesis!" She looked surprised. "And I know what I'd say too."

Kim practiced this technique on the remaining sample questions, using it successfully on " analyze," "examine," and "relate" tasks. The drawing of circles and lines helped her to visually see the connections she needed to make between the information she had memorized and the essay questions. In a real sense they helped her to understand the material rather than "spew" it back. She had to break down the question into its parts before she could build her answer. By using a circle and line diagram, she had to think not only of the things she wanted to say but also of the ways in which they were related. The roman numeral outline didn't allow her to do this—it provided her with a form that sucked out relationships and left holes, which in the timed situation became pits that trapped her. The diagrams, however, allowed her to put the question into her own terms; while more experienced exam takers can do this mentally, Kim needed a picture she could quickly refer to when she got stuck in the writing.

"Thanks," Kim said, scooping together books and papers, "I've got to get to class. But this has really helped. And I'm going to use this circle stuff when I take notes on the reading."

She was out the door before I could say, "Hey, using it on your notes—what a great idea!"

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Let's Talk

As a beginning tutor I thought conversation with a client was a waste of valuable time. On the contrary, I have discovered that talking is just as much a part of the writing process as anything else. The first student I tutored, Nancy, brought in a paper which described a placed she missed. In this case it was a religious temple in her native country of Burma. But instead of using her own words, Nancy took a description from the encyclopedia and copied it word for word. She told me that she couldn't find the words to adequately describe the temple and that she was afraid her own words would sound stupid. I put the paper aside and asked her to tell me about the temple. Away from the confines of the written word, Nancy felt comfortable describing the temple in vivid detail. Talking about the temple loosened up her creative flow, and she was surprised to find out how easy it was to transfer her spoken word to written. In Nancy's case, writing inhibited her ability to freely express herself. Yet once we talked, the words came easily, and she realized that spoken and written words can often be one and the same.

Another student brought in a paper about his native village in Mexico that needed more details. Again, I put the paper aside and we just talked. Actually, he talked and I listened, gently prompting with a question or two about the village. Details came out that even he had forgotten until he started talking and remembering. By the time our session ended he had more than enough detail to complete his paper.

These talking sessions made me think about my own writing process. I have often caught myself talking out loud about my paper. Through this verbal thinking, details, ideas, or problems are solved. I couldn't have done this inside my head or written it down; I had to hear it out loud. Tutees are the same way. It is the interaction with another person that is often the catalyst to written inspiration. Needless to say, whenever I have a client who just can't find the right words or is stuck on a paper, I put the paper away and we talk. My clients soon discover that our conversation, which I call "writing in the air," is also a part of the writing process.

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Address correction requested