....from the editor....

In some months, you may notice the newsletter has a particular focus in that the majority of articles offer related perspectives on a single topic. In other months, newsletter articles range widely on a variety of issues, illustrating our diverse concerns. This month's newsletter is somewhat different, almost circular, as you'll find articles on a basic issue which we continuously examine and re-examine.

The topic which dominates this month's newletter—the idea of a writing center—proves to be one that is perpetually with us but which changes through time and therefore appears to need constant examination. The discussion offered here by Albert DeCiccio, Anne Wright, and Meg Woolbright is carried on from our perspective inside the writing lab, but Kevin Davis's article also reminds us that, despite our best efforts, faculty outside the center are likely to continue to have little awareness of the idea of a writing center. Who are we? What are we? What is it that we do—or should do? The discussion needs to continue....

•Muriel Harris, editor

Moving the Boundary: Putting the Idea of a Writing Center to the Test

"Most writing center people still speak of themselves as underdogs, always struggling."
—Jeanette Harris

Many of us who work in writing centers have accomplished a great deal since 1984, when Stephen North gave us this charge: "we are not here to serve, supplement, back up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum. We are here to talk to writers" ("Idea" 440). Unfortunately, we have repressed these accomplishments because we have not been able to place ourselves in the educational hierarchy. Thus, the words North used to conclude his essay in 1984 are too timely: "If writing centers are going to finally be accepted, surely they must be accepted on their own terms, as places whose primary responsibility, whose only reason for being, is to talk to writers" ("Idea" 446).

Indeed, nearly a decade after North wrote these words no less

an institution than the CCCC Committee on Professional Standards, in its "Statement on Principles and Standards," presented the Writing Center as "the site of third-class intellectual endeavor" (Balester 167). It's no wonder that, as with postmodern theories of knowledge, art, and gender, writing center people have been most successful in establishing a labyrinthian, partisan network that protects their particular lives on the boundary. Why, according to Andrea Lunsford, we have at least three kinds of writing centers: Storehouse (a center of writing information, hierarchically structured and prescriptive), Garret (a center of validation for "I-search," naively libertarian), and Burkean Parlor (a center for collaborative writing, socially organized and egalitarian) (2-5). I'm quite sure that there are those among us who'd entertain extending that taxonomy with various hybrid images of the writing center (perhaps a *dialogized " I-search"*). Now I am a staunch supporter of democracy, and I believe that every voice should be heard. But it seems to me that instead of digging in behind the boundary, struggling to preserve our individual philosophies, we should be much more aggressive in moving the boundary. For all we've accomplished in the past decade, what's most clear about us is what North tried to dispel in 1984: "an image of writing centers as supplemental to the English department curriculum, useful for training graduate teaching assistants and lightening the burden on faculty by giving their students individual attention. In other words, for service" (Balester 167).

The idea of a writing center is powerful. Disseminating that idea is tricky business. Many of us found out that it would be much less complex to keep the idea to ourselves. Thus, at conferences and in print, we chuckled together at misconceptions about the writing center as an *ad hoc* place designed to deal with specific writing problems, as an adjunct to writing instruction where remedial writers could go to get their comma splices fixed. But what we thought was, at first, a great scam that we had orchestrated in keeping the establishment off our backs has now become, I think, a source of our frustration at not having been bold enough to move into the establishment with our "idea." Lately, instead of smiling and scoffing at conferences and in print, we spend our time trying to affirm and reaffirm. We ask: Why is the performance of students working with other students seen as "the blind leading the blind," instead of the dynamic that brings about em-

powerment? Why are we always embroiled in a power struggle with, of all institutions, the English Department? Why, if we make any move at all, do we have to do so in the name of serving the establishment? Why do we have to adapt our aspirations to their ends?

Perhaps the reason we have so many questions today is because we have not yet found the solution to the problem North cited in 1990:
> When we try to extend [the] conversation [about writing, about teaching, about learning, about power] outside of [the writing center], say to talk about writing across the curriculum, then suddenly we're a far more threatening entity than we were when it was a place where students went. (8)

Indeed, the idea of a writing center is threatening. What our mentors (Brannon, Bruffee, Harris, Hawkins, Kail, Lunsford, North, and others) taught us was to make the writing center that site where students are given a say—indeed control—in their work, their education. If nothing else, they taught us how to make the writing center showcase the writing process as well as the social or collaborative nature of writing. Lunsford writes:
> The idea of a center informed by a theory of knowledge as socially constructed, of power and control as constantly negotiated and shared, and as collaboration as

its first principle presents quite a challenge [and threat]....to higher education, an institution that insists on rigidly controlled individual performance, on evaluation as punishment, on isolation. (5) Give "students" control? Writing is "social" or "collaborative"? We can well imagine the incredulity—indeed, the shock—of those who preserve the status quo in higher education.

This challenge, this threat, seems to have silenced us rather than emboldened us. Working in the writing center we have become aware that the self-discovering that should take place as a student goes through school is sometimes stifled in the traditional paradigm. In that world, we have learned, competition is promoted in a myopic search for the "best" students. We know that this search profits precious few students; in fact, we work with the many who end up branded with an ugly tattoo, "the truly illiterate among us" (Rose 3). We've talked about writing with these stigmatized students, who too often equate their supposed "low rank" with their self-worth and, as a result, isolate themselves, fearing that any attempt at integration may be met with ridicule. And we have come to deplore that attitude which associates non-participation in a learning activity with behavior dysfunction; we know that what it really is is a fear of oppression. The writing center—open and supportive—has demonstrated to us that such fears can be met and overcome. Yet, in the face of decreasing support and recognition for the alternative we offer to higher education, we writing center people have chosen to become martyrs of a sort, justifying our behavior by telling ourselves: "But the students need us, and we love the work" (Balester 171). First, we have been self-conscious in the way we run our centers—from recruiting and training staff to citing statistics to explain our existence. Second, we have proceeded cautiously with respect to programs—always working within the boundary of this motto: *It's better to win than to be right!* Our writing centers have consistently served as ready auditors to student-writers testing their developing abilities. But we have done so by staying on the margins.

Obviously, it's no longer clear to me that this is the way to proceed. In fact, such a mode of operation may be the reason why "the current wording of the 'Statement [on Principles and Standards]' falls short of addressing the true working conditions in writing centers" (Balester 167). Our hope may be that there are those among us now who are demanding more recognition, more support. To achieve such demands, we must be prepared to demonstrate why the writing center is crucial—if not central—to an English department's writing program. We must be prepared to show exactly why writing center pedagogy is at the cutting edge of educational reform. We must be prepared to deal squarely with the inevitable—to be right. Mike Rose wrote, in *Lives on the Boundary*:

> We are in the middle of an extraordinary social experiment: the attempt to provide education for all members of a vast pluralistic democracy. To have any prayer of success, we'll need many conceptual blessings....At heart, we'll need a guiding set of principles that do not encourage us to retreat from, but to move closer to, an understanding of the rich mix of speech and ritual and story that is America. (238)

I believe that the writing center is the place of Rose's experiment. I also believe that the writing center must guide all of us in education to that understanding he discusses. I say this because writing centers provide members of the academy free access to resources. We do so because we desire a community of learners that sustains itself through reading, writing, and responding across the academy and in the community. We therefore have to be prepared to fight for our place in establishing any and all pedagogical agendas.

To my mind, putting the idea of the writing center to the test is the most pressing challenge we face. To do so properly, to move out from behind the boundary, we may have to decide if North's 1990 hypothetical description of the writing center is satisfying:

> Maybe it would be better to have a big writing center, and everybody who went there went and wrote papers for courses that we knew about, and we all agreed that this kind of writing is OK; this is what we'll learn to do. If you don't like it, too bad; this is what you're going to learn. You know, it's Sheridan Baker through the writing center. (9)

Should we move in this way, some will surely point out that the idea of a writing center will be less intact. I believe, therefore, that we need to demonstrate how the writing center is an agency of both social and cognitive growth. I think that this means we come together—become "big," if you will, not in the Sheridan Baker sense North jocularly described, but by

affirming the second word in our title and by becoming *centers* of reading, writing, thinking, and learning. I believe we strengthen ourselves by changing and practicing as we and our students see fit, no longer "via the back door, not—like some marginal ballplayer—by doing whatever it takes to stay on the team" (North, "Idea," 446). I think we need to investigate our practice, to discuss the results of such research in forums like this one, and then to take the kind of action we know to be right, however unsettling that prospect may appear to be. I think we need to make better use of local and national writing center associations, the CCCC, and even the MLA to get the following message out: Writing centers are not the next best thing to writing instruction or writing instructors; rather, writing centers are the best next thing in writing instruction—in education.

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Establishing a High School Writing Lab

In recent years, more and more high schools have become interested in establishing writing labs or writing centers. These labs take many different forms, from computer-centered to tutoring-centered; from English department service programs to across-the-curriculum programs; from peer tutor staffs to professional staffs; and several combinations of the above. As funds become available or school boards recognize the need for such services, teachers find themselves in need of guidelines for setting up writing centers. As a co-director of a high school writing lab in operation since 1983, I would like to offer some suggestions.

Assuming the funding has been provided, the first step is to write a philosophy on which all subsequent decisions will be based. If the staff has been selected, they might write the philosophy, but a better plan would be for the teachers who are going to be served by the writing center to meet and discuss what they want a writing center to do. With this information in hand, the staff might then do the actual composing of the philosophy. At Hazelwood West, where I teach, our philosophy is as follows: We believe all students have something to say and that they can and will say it in writing if they have the confidence of knowing they can get help if and when they need it. Since we wrote that statement originally, we have informally added a corollary: Computers often help students improve their writing because they make revising so easy.

All decisions regarding staffing, purchasing equipment and supplies, providing time for teachers and students to use the lab, and deciding what activities to pursue in the lab are based on this philosophy. Without some underlying principles, it becomes very easy to turn a writing lab into a computer lab, since most high school writing labs have computers. The difference, as I see it, concerns what activities students are engaged in when they come to the lab. More about that later.

Once a philosophy is agreed upon, the location in the school must be decided on. Many schools have a very limited choice, but if at all possible, the writing center should be close to the English department classrooms and/or the library. Ours was not close to

either when we first opened our lab, but when we outgrew the rooms first assigned to us, the principal approved the partitioning of our library, which is across the hall from the majority of our English classrooms. Thus our lab is easily accessible from both, with little chance of students wandering off to other areas when they come to the lab. Because of the easy access, students can come and go to the library without hall passes, a blessing—especially for students working on research papers.

Space and equipment go hand-in-hand when planning a writing lab. If space permits and your philosophy includes both tutoring and wordprocessing activities, then you have to think about how many computers you need and whether or not you have space for them. If you don't have much space, then you must consider how you can accomplish the most with the space you have. At Hazelwood West, we have two large rooms, one of which is used primarily to tutor and to house resources (software, textbooks, books on student writing, and a professional library for teachers—approximately one hundred books on teaching writing). The other room has twenty-five computers (presently Apple IIe's which will be replaced in the next year or two by Macintoshes) and one Macintosh SE. Students come to the lab individually or with their classes to do wordprocessing. But for our first two years, we had one, then two, then six computers, and we coped by having students work in pairs or do collaborative writing. One big advantage of having enough computers for a whole class to work on at the same time is that the teachers can come with their classes. Then the staff doesn't have to wonder whether they are assisting in the areas the teachers want, and the classroom teacher is another person available to help the students with individual problems.

Staffing is another major concern in establishing a writing lab. Some schools use peer tutors only, under the supervision and training of a professional staff member. Others have professional staff with peer tutors as assistants. Still others have professional staff only. I know some wordprocessing labs that have no staff, but I don't consider them *writing* labs. In our school, we have a staff composed of two English teachers who each work half a day in the lab and teach two classes. We also have a teacher assistant who is in the lab all day. The assistant keeps records and assists students and teachers with computer use and

writing problems. I have observed labs that have a different English teacher each hour—there are many ways to staff a lab. The one essential, from my point of view, is to have an English teacher available who knows and believes in the writing process. Another advantage of having an English teacher in the lab is that she/he will be familiar with the writing curriculum of the school.

Record keeping is also a very important function of the lab staff. Before the lab opens, plans should be made and forms designed for efficient record keeping. If computers are available, consideration should be given to purchasing a data base program. We have student information forms, daily logs for each student, sign-up sheets for teachers, and a daily sign-in sheet for students. With our data base, we can compile at the end of each semester an extensive report on student use, teacher use, usage by grade level, usage by classes, and much additional information. Such records may be essential to justify the continuation of the lab, but even if they are not, the information is useful to the staff.

In most high school writing labs I am familiar with, the staff is engaged in a variety of activities. Naturally, students work on writing assignments made in English classes, but in most labs, students also come from classes in all disciplines to seek help with their writing, or to write their papers on computers, or both. At Hazelwood West, the staff also assists classroom teachers in planning writing assignments; sponsors a writing club, which publishes a literary magazine, and sponsors a writing contest within the school; helps students write job applications and resumes; provides assistance to students who need to write college and/or scholarship applications; and serves as a clearinghouse for writing contests. The assistance we provide includes tutoring and the technical aspects of using wordprocessing programs and other software we have available.

Selecting software is another job that must be done at the beginning, if the lab has computers. From our experience, we advise people to buy as little software as possible at the start, because new and better software is constantly becoming available and because much that is sold under the heading of "writing" really turns out to be practice exercises. The programs we find students and teachers use most frequently include wordprocessing

programs (buy one that won't take newcomers long to learn but which is sophisticated enough to meet the requirements of high school writing), programs that will produce newspapers, certificate programs, and graphics programs. We also have a crossword puzzle program and a story-writing program. To meet the needs of teachers and students, taking a survey of needs before spending money might be helpful.

Like any new endeavor, there is no way to anticipate and prepare for all problems that may develop. Most of what you need to know, you will find out as the need arises. But it is a help to be prepared for staffing, recordkeeping, and selecting of resources. It is especially helpful to have a philosophy that guides all decisions concerning a high school writing lab.

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> Hazelwood, MO

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What the Faculty Know About What We Do: Survey Results

And just when I thought things were going great. What a time to discover—reaffirm—that the faculty have no idea what we do in the writing center. Let me explain.

The East Central University Writing Center has been in existence for seven years and has shown an increase in use each year. In a university with a 4,000 head count, we now complete nearly 2,000 tutorial sessions a year. We have signs all over campus and a number of professors who regularly work with us. We communicate our services and availability directly to faculty at least four times a year through flyers or letters. We conduct a fall workshop for new faculty, and in the last four years have visited at least one department meeting in almost every department on campus. The campus newspaper does an annual article on the center, and the campus-produced weekly tv news production has featured the center. For three years we have published an on-campus writing-across-the-curriculum newsletter with regular columns from the writing center.

So, I had reasoned, the faculty probably knows who we are and what we do. Boy was I wrong.

Recently, I was called upon to do a 30-minute session during a faculty development WAC workshop. I decided to begin my presentation with a quiz, then answer the quiz questions during my presentation. The faculty scored miserably (and these were faculty members apparently interested in WAC because of their attendance at the workshop); and that, of course, means that my public knowledge campaign had failed miserably.

The dismal results became obvious from the first question, "Where is the Writing Center located and what are its hours?" Of the 17 faculty who completed the quiz, none were able to give the Writing Center's specific location; two gave decent though incomplete directions, and only six others—6!—could even identify the building where the center was located. No one knew the Center's exact hours and only four seemed aware of our evening hours.

Second, I asked the faculty how long they imagined our average session lasted. Six respondents didn't even venture a guess; seven underestimated, making guesses of between 20 and 40 minutes. Two guessed at over an hour. There is a clear trend to these numbers: most faculty don't have any idea how long a writing tutorial session lasts, and most greatly underestimate the intensity of our efforts.

Third, I asked the respondents to guess how many of our clients came from freshman composition courses; it varies by semester but averages out at about 15%. Four respondents admitted that they had no idea, and two underestimated. The remaining 11 over-guessed, some by huge numbers (90 and 95%). Clearly, the faculty as a whole does not realize how much of our efforts are addressed toward cross-curricular writing projects.

The next part of the survey consisted of true/false questions, given below, along with the number of answers in each category and an explanation of the correct answer:

True	False	
10	7	Tutors proofread papers for students. (False. We might offer advice or assist writers in proofreading their own work, but we never do it.)
0	17	Tutors help write papers for students. (False. At least they got one right!)
11	5	The Center's primary function is to help students write mechanically correct papers. (False. We view mechanical correctness as a last concern, coming after higher order concerns.)
15	1	Tutors are well trained for their jobs. (True. All tutors complete a semester-long course.)
15	1	Tutors come from a variety of majors. (True. We currently have 12 tutors from six majors.)
8	9	The Center primarily exists for the direct instruction of students who are deficient in writing skills. (False. We do supplemental instruction, we work with good writers as well as weaker ones, and skills instruction is not our strong point.)
15	2	Good writers are likely to benefit from a visit to the center. (True. We think that any writer benefits from direct feedback.)
11	4	The best way to get a student to the center is to identify students who need extra help and suggest they attend. (False. Those students rarely show up at all, especially with a good attitude. We find the best ways to get students to the center are to ignore them (let them find us on their own) or bribe them (offer bonus points).

What does this mean? It means that our services are not understood by the faculty, even though we publicize them widely. It means the faculty have little idea of how to get their students to the writing center, why they should come, or where to send them. It means reams of paper, miles of words, and stacks of poster board have done little to convey our message to the faculty. It means we remain—even to those faculty concerned enough about writing to attend a WAC workshop—an enigma. It means faculty still see us as a remediation lab, concentrating on mechanical aspects of writing and offering proofreading services to students.

It also means our acceptance and growth are coming from somewhere other than our fliers and newsletters and department visits. It means our success comes from our success, from word of mouth, from happy clients. I always recognized the importance of success, but I never knew it almost single-handedly accounted for growth. Now I know. Now I know where to concentrate my efforts.

Kevin Davis
East Central University
Ada, Oklahoma

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 15-17: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Stillwater, OK
   Contact: Sharon Wright, 114 Thatcher Hall, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078

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

East Central Writing Centers Association

**March 12-13, 1993
Muncie, Indiana**

"Writing Centers: Innovative Theories and Practices"

**Featured speakers:
Jeanne Simpson & James Berlin**

Student fee: $30; faculty fee: $60. Registration deadline: January 30, 1993. Contact Laura Helms (317-285-8094) or Cindy Johanek (317-285-8535), Ball State U., Muncie, IN 47306.

South Central Writing Centers Association

**April 15-17, 1993
Stillwater, OK**

Keynote Speaker: Jeanne Simpson

Contact Sharon Wright, 114 Thatcher Hall, Oklahoma State U., Stillwater, OK 74078; 405-744-9365.

Call for Proposals

National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing

**November 5-7, 1993
Allendale, Michigan**

"Reflections and Projections."

Presentations in all formats are welcome, but preference will be given to those which involve the audience and are presented by peer tutors. For information and a form on which to submit proposals, write to Roz Mayberry or Walter Foote, Dept. of English, Grand Valley State U., Allendale, MI 49401. Phone: 616-895-3186 or 895-3479. Fax: 895-3016. Internet: footew@gvsu.edu Proposal deadline: April 15, 1993.

Tutors' Column

A Slight Case of Plagiarism

Looking back over my journal entries of my tutoring sessions with Eric, I realized that from the beginning of the semester I had known something about him that I was, until recently, unwilling consciously to face. Eric hates English, not only because he feels that he is "no good" at it, but also because he simply sees no use in it. His initial statement as to why he came to tutoring, "my English sucks," could easily have been reduced to "English sucks." Although I really ought to have been prepared for this as I began tutoring, the recognition of this actually came as something of a shock to me, even as it was mixed also with some relief once it finally came out. Previous to this, most of the people I knew had at least pretended to see the worth of studying literature out of respect for my obvious passion for it. And my other two students did not share Eric's attitude at all; my Subject A student was from the first highly motivated and tried to make the best of her not always terribly stimulating class, and had even expressed an interest in becoming an English major. My other student is an intended Political Science major who hopes to study in France, but she, too, was excited about her Comp. Lit. 1B course, and is very sophisticated in her approach to literature. My enthusiastic assumptions about the glories and benefits of studying the written word were corroborated by these two, and helped me to rekindle their interest at low points in the semester, but they also often blinded me to Eric's most crucial problem with English 1B: he really just didn't care enough to apply himself, and saw other things as far more important.

The problems, I suppose, began immediately as Eric's only question of me in our very brief "getting to know you" talk on the first day was one regarding my "qualifications," and the memory of the worst-scene scenario in tutor training the week before danced before my anxious eyes. I resisted the temptation to give Jennifer's answer, "No, actually I'm a Molecular Biology major..." mostly because I knew I wouldn't be able to do it with a straight face. More than this, though, this guy was stressed

out; he knew he needed help, and was desperately looking to me to provide it. Pleased at feeling needed, I assumed that his motivation for seeking tutoring lay in a real desire to improve his writing rather than, as I later learned, his wish to get a decent grade and finally be done with the evil Reading and Comp. requirement.

As time and tutoring went on, sessions with Eric became more and more frustrating. As much as I tried to dispel this notion by being personable, casual, "collaborative," Eric obviously expected me to be the authority, and I often felt as if I were being treated more like hired help than as a partner and peer. As we went over his papers, Eric only wanted answers, and I provided only questions, much to his irritation. I desperately wanted to believe that he was in fact interested in the readings for the course, but was just having trouble analyzing and writing about them. Certainly there were plenty of reasons that this should be so; Eric intends to double major in math and computer science, and was continually stressed out by the demands of those time-consuming and difficult courses. More importantly in terms of reading and writing, however, is the fact that Eric, who is Chinese, has only been in this country for about five years, and still has significant language problems, not to mention the cultural difficulties involved in reading canonical works of English literature.

It proved to be his paper on the paramount figure in English literary history, William Shakespeare, which was the turning point in our relationship. We worked on his *Othello* paper together for two or three arduous sessions. He brought it to me in two sections, the first half one week, and the completed draft, minus conclusion, the next week; and it was surprisingly good. Language problems had virtually disappeared, and his argument was fairly well thought out and developed. When I commented that he must have spent a lot of time working on it, however, he just sort of grimaced and didn't say anything. He was concerned as to whether the paper had "unity"

and " flow," two things which his instructor had been stressing in class, but in going over the paper, he became really agitated when I pointed out parts which were confusing or not entirely developed. He wanted me to tell him what to write, and when I wouldn't, he would either simply cross things out or say, in his typical way, " Well, I'm not about to change it now." His parting comment on the last day of working on this paper, when I refused to "give him a sentence" to end his conclusion with, was, "If I can't sleep tonight it's because of you." I was left exhausted and frustrated that our sessions together had become more like battles than collaborations, and looked forward to giving him a midterm questionnaire the next week, so that we could finally talk about what was going on, and hopefully re-establish our roles, which I apparently had never made clear in the first place.

When Eric came in the next week, he didn't have a new paper to work on yet, and had barely started reading the new novel assigned for the class. He asked a few gratuitous questions about *Frankenstein* and then wanted to leave—ten minutes into the session. I gave him a questionnaire to fill out and went up to see his instructor who had office hours at that time. My intention was to set up a time to see her later, but she wanted to talk right away because of a serious problem with Eric, which he, of course, had neglected to tell me about. She gave me the shocking news that Eric had plagiarized his *Othello* paper. Her T.A., who had been reading for Eric for a long time, had discovered that it was taken almost word for word from the introduction of a different edition of the play. When she confronted Eric with this, he at first denied it and then admitted that he had copied the paper from his sister, not realizing that she in turn had taken it from the introduction. I was aghast, furious, and at a complete loss as to what to do about it. Helen suggested that I simply tell Eric that I knew that there was a problem with the paper, and that he was required to rewrite it.

Back in the Learning Center, Eric had long since finished writing out his one-line answers to my questionnaire. I set it aside without reading it, and attempted to talk to Eric. I asked him how he felt about our tutoring sessions, and said that I knew that he was having a difficult semester. He said that tutoring was fine, except that he felt that I was asking him questions that he didn't know the

answers to, and was in the position of having to guess what I meant. I explained my position on this, that I never had specific answers in mind and so on. When I told him that I had spoken to Helen, however, he looked utterly stricken. I asked him if he wanted to work on the rewrite together—I was much nicer about all of this than I had intended to be—he mumbled, "later," packed up his things and virtually ran out of the room.

My feelings about this situation were surprisingly strong and mixed. I hadn't realized until now just how much I had invested in working with Eric, and was terribly hurt and angry that he had blatantly deceived me. I felt like an idiot as well that I hadn't noticed anything particularly strange about the paper, except that it was markedly better than Eric's previous work. Helen had found this an almost laughable situation because it was so very blatant, but I took it as a personal affront, and a reflection of my failings as a tutor. If I had really been there for Eric, I felt, he would not have been reduced to seeing plagiarism as his only option.

Immediate efforts to talk to Eric failed miserably; he absolutely refused to talk to me even about his feelings about school, and I didn't even touch on the plagiarism issue. As much as I wanted there to be honesty between us, I felt that the abyss between us would be made even greater by my pushing it, and there was just never a time when I felt comfortable bringing it up. Eric was obviously truly abashed about what had happened, and I believe that he understands the seriousness of his actions as well, without my reiteration. Although neither of us ever mentioned the *Othello* paper again (I found out from Helen that he did in fact eventually rewrite it), after a time, and to my amazement, Eric actually began to come around. He unexpectedly opened up to me one day about his real feelings about English, and to my relief, expressed a real interest in and (can I say it?) love for his major subjects. I hadn't thought it possible that someone could get emotionally involved in a math problem, and not in a book, but this is what Eric told me he does, and my pretentious assumptions were re-evaluated.

After this session, Eric and I were finally much more comfortable with each other. I wasn't afraid to be tough on him anymore, and he no longer expected me to do his work,

although it still drove him crazy that the reason I never gave him any answers was that there are in fact no answers. Our parting was not a heartfelt moment; I felt a little sentimental, because Eric had been my first student, and was also the first one to whom I had to say goodbye. I felt bad as well that although his writing has improved slightly, his attitude towards English has not changed at all, although I can hope that coming to see me as an ally rather than an adversary has helped to make it less alienating to him. Eric, however, happy to have only one paper left in his English career, took his leave by running by me down the hall yelling "have a nice summer!"

<div style="text-align:center">

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

A Response to "Contesting 'The Idea of a Writing Center': The Politics of Writing Center Research"

I've been struggling to write this response to Nancy Grimm's recent *Writing Lab Newsletter* article for over a month. The difficulty I'm having is that although my pedagogical idealism wants to agree with everything Grimm says, the political realities I live with tell me that I cannot. For me, the issues are these: First, I question Grimm's use of North's "Idea" as a conceptual frame. Doing so, I think, results in not only an unnecessary blurring of research and tutoring, but a misrepresentation of North. Second, although I agree with Grimm's vision of writing center research that uncovers and questions pedagogical difference, I know first-hand the risks involved when these questions are transferred to tutoring situations. I want to argue, then, for caution and a clearer articulation of the political differences between research and tutoring.

Maybe it would help if I gave you some indication of the political circumstances in which I work. I direct the writing center at a small liberal arts college "in the Franciscan tradition" just outside of Albany, New York.

I have been working in writing centers in one capacity or another for the past eleven years. Currently, I have a "split position": As the Director of the Writing Center, I report to the Vice President for Academic Affairs; as an Assistant Professor of English, I am the only person with a degree in Composition and Rhetoric in a fifteen-member Literature (that's a capital "L") department. Now maybe this dual position—not "really" an English teacher, not "really" an administrator—has given me a certain distance and made me more sensitive to the politics of the institution. Or maybe I'm just naturally cautious. Whichever it is, I know I'm not alone.

As I said earlier, I question Grimm's framing her article as a "contest" between her ideas and North's "The Idea of a Writing Center." I have three reasons for this. First, I have to admit that I am somewhat bothered by critiquing a 1984 article in terms of a 1992 conversation. Maybe it's nostalgia. My TWO copies of "The Idea of a Writing Center" both hold prominent positions on my shelves—one at home and the other at work. But I think it's more than that. And this brings me to my second reason. On one level, the two articles are really not about the same thing at all. In 1984, as I read North, his concern was to establish some authority for writing centers; his goal was to articulate a coherent and respectable mission for those of us who spend our lives talking to student writers. In 1992, Grimm's central concern is not so much with the interaction between students and tutors as it is with the implications of these interactions on writing center research; her goal is to stimulate research that attempts a critique of the larger educational system. So, I have to wonder why Grimm focuses on research while critiquing an article on tutoring. The fact that after eight years North's article is still widely cited and widely respected suggests that it needs to be looked at—maybe even rewritten—but doing so in the context of research seems to be a somewhat cumbersome approach.

Third, I disagree with her reading of North. One of Grimm's major points of contention is that "Idea" is not political enough. Not political enough? When North says that writing centers are not places for students with "special problems in composition" (434) or when he says "teachers, as teachers, do not need and cannot use, a writing center" (440), these are political statements about what we do in writing cen-

ters. When he says, we "work with writers at any time during the composing of a given piece of writing" and talk about "whole pieces of discourse, and not exercises in what might be construed as 'subskills' " (434), these are political statements about writing. In fact, the whole first half of North's article is an indictment of the larger system, a charge that no matter what we say, the politics of writing and talking about writing have not changed all that much. In my reading of North's article, one of his points is to uncover—and answer—the politics of writing center work—in 1984. The problem, of course, is that in eight years, the politics have changed. When Grimm says that "writing center work is much more politically and ideologically charged than North's essay indicates," I would argue that it's not a question of more or less but of difference.

Grimm then cites North's assertion that we have to "support the teacher's position" as contrary to his claim that writing centers do not need teachers. She ends this section with a call for research that questions "institutional, pedagogical, or curricular practices" which she says we cannot have if we agree with North that "all we can do is help the writer learn how to operate" in the context of the institution. I interpret North's position as, "I don't work for teachers, so don't SEND your students to the writing center, and don't tell me what to do with them once they are here," *but* "At no time will I or a peer tutor say to a student, 'Gee, this is an awful assignment' or 'You got a C? Your teacher is an idiot!' " I read nothing in any of these statements that would preclude doing research that questions the larger institution; in fact, one of the ironies is that I think this sort of research is consonant with North's basic philosophy. What I do hear is a clear awareness of the politics of tutoring.

Another of Grimm's criticisms has to do with North's claim that the writing center is "an institutional response to the need of writers to talk about their writing." Grimm seems to think that writing centers exist somehow outside of, apart from the rest of the institution. Although I find the idealism here quite stimulating, I find the reality quite puzzling. Whether I like it or not, I am a part of a larger system—a system that pays my and my tutors' salaries. For me to ignore this would be to commit political suicide.

Let me move on to my second point. As I indicated earlier, I agree with what Grimm has

to say about doing research. I agree that we need to admit that writing and writing center work are politically and ideologically charged. I agree that we cannot pretend that talking about writing is value-free and that we need to look at the boundaries of conflicting ideologies for the site of struggle that *is* what we do in writing centers. And I agree that a fitting course for writing center research is looking at how our and our students' subjectivities are constructed by educational discourse. Research that questions institutional pedagogical practices would be an exciting path for writing center research to take, surely a step up from articles on how-can-I-help-you surveys and descriptions of what-I-do-in-my-writing-center. I like these questions. I not only think that they are the right ones for writing centers to be asking, but I think that they will raise the level of the conversation about writing centers, something that Anne DiPardo's essay does admirably well.

The problem though, is that in offering her vision for research in terms of a critique of North's vision of tutoring, Grimm is conflating the two activities and saying, in effect, that the pedagogies and politics of these two are somehow the same. As I see it, although there are, or at least ought to be, pedagogical connections between tutoring and research, the politics of these two activities are not at all the same: The people asking the research questions and the people doing the tutoring hold different positions of power in the academic hierarchy. I would also argue that neither the assumptions nor the questions are the same. When I do research, I agree with Grimm. My assumption is that things are not fine. And I not only struggle to find ways to make them better but to communicate these ways to a larger audience. But when I tutor, I agree with North. Given the politics that I and many others work with, I teach my tutors to "support the teacher's position." Doing anything else would ultimately hurt the people I'm trying to help the most—the students who use the writing center and the tutors who work there. Assuming for a moment that Grimm is right, I wonder what the conference would look like when Deirdre wants to talk about the difficulty she's having writing her philosophy paper and the tutor wants to talk about the effects of academic discourse on the student's subjectivity. Who holds the power here? Who gets to decide what gets talked about, when, and for how long? I don't mean to be flip and I hope I'm not sounding schizophrenic, but I am trying to be realistic

about the political situations that most of us live with. I agree that Grimm's questions need to be asked, but I disagree that the tutoring situation is the place to ask them.

Let me relate an example from the discussion at a roundtable I participated in at CCCC, and then I'll end. I was talking about my negotiations for the last three years in team-teaching a scientific writing course with a colleague from biology. I told of my being a good guest, of my arriving in the biology department bearing gifts—strategies, techniques, assignments to help students be better writers. I told of our increasing the number of class hours each week from one hour to two, of changing the focus from "editing" to "revising" and of training upper-level biology majors as writing tutors. Another panelist spoke of her experiences heading a WAC committee. She talked of the politics of being newly hired, untenured and trying to get tenured faculty from different disciplines not only to listen to her, but to sit down and talk about their assumptions about writing without screaming at each other. The respondent on the panel criticized us both for working within a collaboration-as-consensus model. Citing Dan Mahala's recent "Writing Utopias," she took the position that as writing center and WAC people our role is to "interrogate" our colleagues' views of knowledge and teaching. I couldn't help thinking that in saying these things the respondent was criticizing us for not politicizing writing while ignoring the politics that many of us live with. I think that Grimm makes the same mistake here.

In a recent article Sandy Moore and Michael Kleine write about Moore losing her job as the result of an essay she wrote for Kleine's class. Toward the end of the article, Kleine says that before this happened, he believed that his students "were protected...that they could take risks..." and that they would not have to deal with the possibility that "power flows two ways: that it is capable of flowing outward and changing the world, but that it is also capable of flowing back toward the writer and doing harm" (388). I know about this harm first-hand. So, where does this leave me? At the moment I am in the uncomfortable position of having my idealism run headlong into reality. Am I saying that I will not continue to raise questions and challenge others' assumptions about teaching and learning? Not at all. But I am saying that when I encourage other people—especially my students—to do likewise, I need to be honest with them about the very real consequences of their actions.

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Writing Center Ethics

Writing centers are uniquely situated in most educational institutions, finding themselves at the nexus where students, instructors, administrators, peers, assignments, reading, writing, talking, language use, social influences, personal lives, and cultural practices all come together. We see students from all parts of campus with all types of assignments from all types of instructors. We look at what students have written, we talk to them about their plans, we use conversation to draw out the personal experiences and topical information they can use to improve their papers, and we try to get a sense of who they are as individuals so we can understand how to help them become more effective as writers. Often—perhaps more often than we have any right to expect—this complex web of persons, practices, and pressures can be casually homogenized in the writing conference, easily subsumed into a "rhetorical situation" whose general features, if not completely transparent, are at least non-disruptive and tacitly accepted by everyone involved. Most students are agreeable, most instructors supportive, most assignments reasonable, most drafts inoffensive, most administrators non-intrusive.

From time to time, however, this delicate web shatters. Suddenly and without warning, we are faced with the unusual and the unexpected in our tutorials, situations that strip away the illusion of transparency in writing conferences and highlight the strongly situated nature of the work we do. We have all, for example, encountered students who cry in conference for personal or academic reasons, assignments which seem geared for student failure rather than student success, instructors whose comments on student papers are either misguided or vicious, and administrators who want to know about individual students or the assignments given by certain members of the faculty. Situations like these force us out of our comfortable, possibly complacent, spaces as writing consultants and into positions where we have to confront uncomfortable questions: What do I do about this? What can I do? What should I do?

Complicating our ability to respond to situations and questions like these is our underlying belief that writing centers and the tutors who work there have to maintain a careful, albeit precarious, balance of involvement and distance. On the one hand, as tutors, we believe that some of the most effective writing instruction takes place through the personal involvement of one-on-one conferencing. On the other hand, we feel the pressure not to become too involved, either by appropriating student texts as our own when we talk about drafts or by allowing ourselves to get drawn into the personal lives and concerns of our students. Similar concerns for involvement and distance affect writing centers as a whole. While we want to respect the privacy of tutorial conferences and what goes on there, there may be compelling reasons, both from within the conference and from outside it, to share that information with others. What do we do, for example, if a student shares suicidal tendencies in a writing conference? If an administrator wants to know about the writing assignments and evaluation practices of an international TA? How do we balance our desire to keep the writing center independent of particular classes or departments with our responsibilities to the high school, college, or university where we are located?

It does not exaggerate the case too much, I think, to argue that ethics, both in terms of abstract issues and specific cases, are central to writing center operations. Not only do they serve to define a writing center's place within its home institution, but they also comprise much of what we talk about in training sessions, tutor meetings, and professional conferences. The "What would you do if...?" scenario is a commonplace in our role as tutors. More recently, for me, it has become a commonplace in my role as a writing center director. Different cases, perhaps, but the same basic issues.

My purpose in writing this column, which will be a regular feature of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, is to explore the diverse nature of writing center ethics, focusing in particular on the issues which arise from situations we are all likely to face at one time or another when working as tutors or directors. What I hope to do in each column, for the most part, is

examine a specific tutoring situation or scenario that raises clear ethical questions about how to proceed. I expect some of these ethical questions to be more broad-ranging and complex than others, and I don't expect to have a lot of answers. (This is not the same thing, of course, as saying I don't expect to have a lot of opinions.) Still, everything I say should be taken as provisional and open to discussion. I welcome your comments and feedback, and you can send it to me either directly, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, or in care of the newsletter. If you have topics you would like to see addressed here, please send them to me as well. Though I can't promise to use them all, I promise to read and consider them all carefully.

That is, after all, the ethical thing to do.

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Tutoring a Deaf Student: Another View

Elizabeth Faerm's description in the March 1992 "Tutors' Column" of working with a deaf student was very different from my experience, largely because of the differences between her student and mine. I discovered that the student I tutored did need to be worked with as a deaf person instead of an average student, and her deafness affected her understanding of words and word placement. The differences between our experiences reemphasize the individuality of writing center sessions. In our writing center, where we are finding more and more cases of the need to diversify the "model conference," the need to be flexible became very apparent when I worked with a deaf student, Susan.

Susan, who has been deaf since birth, did not formally learn to read lips, and she chooses not to speak unless she is very comfortable with someone. She realizes that her speaking voice is difficult to understand and relies almost entirely on sign language. A sign interpreter attended classes with her.

I began working with Susan by chance when she walked in the writing center and signed some words. At first I panicked. How was I to help a deaf student? How was I to run this conference?

After my panic subsided, I treated her appointment as much like any other as I could, wanting Susan to be comfortable. By writing notes I discovered her writing task, a geography report. Because I couldn't ask her to read the text, I read it aloud, pointing to where I read. When a sentence-level problem was present, I stopped. If she saw the problem, she wrote in changes. If she didn't, we wrote notes. We communicated visually also, although the communication was not very sophisticated—nods of the head, frowns, shoulder shrugs. Soon I became comfortable and felt silly reading her text aloud, which I obviously was doing for my sake, not hers.

Later I worried about whether I had really fulfilled Susan's needs, wondering what she thought about the conference and if she had learned anything. Reflecting on the conference, I decided that trying to make her session like those of others was a disservice because Susan has special needs that should be taken into account. Otherwise I was like a person telling someone in a wheelchair to walk up stairs.

About a week later Susan reappeared at the writing center, her appearance reassuring me that she must have benefited from our first session. I felt confident about this conference, having thought about some strategies. This time the conference proceeded in silence. We continued to work by writing notes and giving some visual cues.

Many of Susan's writing problems are related to her living in a silent world—problems with articles and syntax, problems common to students who know English as a second language. Written English is a second language for Susan, and her first language—sign language—is very different from written English. Articles are not used; tenses are usually not shown; plurals are shown by repeating a sign or are indicated by context. Like international students, Susan has to learn the conventions of written English. But an important difference exists: we hope that the international students will learn to hear English; Susan will never hear it. She needs to write effective English by visual memorization.

As conferences with Susan continued, I decided to learn the sign alphabet so I could communicate a little in her language and write fewer notes. Working with a tutor, I learned the alphabet quickly and decided to learn signs related to writing. The writing center staff and I brainstormed words that I should know, words such as agreement, confusing sentence, and paragraph.

Although I was worried about making an error in Susan's language, as she was afraid of making an error in mine, I was excited about our new means of communication. I was touched when I first signed "hi" to her and she spoke "hi" to me, the first time I had heard her speak. Even though my sign vocabulary was limited, I was able to enter a little of her world and to communicate with her more quickly. I soon realized, however, that the words I needed to learn were those that would allow me to question (e.g., who, what, where) so that I could employ an indirect, questioning approach. Using sign language allowed Susan and me to work more collaboratively in another way: she helped me learn her primary language as I helped her learn mine.

Although Susan and I communicated better, our conferences were limited. Content discussions were restricted, a restriction that was also apparent when we discussed word choices. I offered a smaller range of suggestions than I might offer a hearing student. We could, though, talk effectively about organization. If a section needed better organization, Susan would try different strategies until one worked. She was learning written English by trial and error, as to some extent we all do.

I had mixed feelings when she graduated, being happy for her but sad to see our conferences end. During our year and a half of working together, I learned from Susan, and one of the lessons was the need for flexibility in writing center conferences. Susan needed to be treated differently in order for her to have equal opportunities in a writing center conference.

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