The WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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

Volume 17, Number 7 March, 1993

....from the editor....

Those of us in writing labs have very real problems to deal with: marginalization by almost everyone outside our centers; misunderstandings about who we are and what we do; ever expanding lists of responsibilities (and shrinking budgets); lack of formal training in our area of composition, and so on.

But in the midst of all that hand-wringing, there is also constant acknowledgment of how immediate, real, and effective our work is and how closely tied we are to student needs. This month's issue is particularly rich with articles relevant to our daily work. There are thoughtful discussions of questions to ask, model papers to keep on hand, strategies to deal with spoken grammar, ways to equip centers with computers, and workshops to offer.

And as an indication of how dedicated our contributing authors are, Eric Crump manged to get his column to the newsletter the day after his second daughter was born. Congratulations, Eric!

•Muriel Harris, editor

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Helping Writers Get Hold of Their *Self* with Mediational Questions

One of the goals of writing tutors is that we need to reinforce the kind of self-reliance that good writing demands. Because students often come to the writing center with papers that lack conviction, our more experienced consultants have taught me to use good mediational questions. To illustrate how I connect *mediational* questions with writing center goals, I borrow from behavioral psychology where "mediate" is sometimes used to describe the cognitive activity that goes on between a stimulus and a response. Mediational questions, then, can be regarded as a way to draw out a writer's awareness and judgment which ideally take place, we mighty say, between the "stimulus" of a writing assignment and the "response" of the final draft.

Student writers are asked to make judgments about

the information they have gained in preparing for an assignment. But what that really means is that they take a closer look at their inner selves and discover what their own attitudes are about their topic. If tutors use good listening skills during this mediational process between assignment and draft, students can gain a more convincing perspective in their writing because they will be able to cite evidence for their opinions. They will have worked through a process to discover how their attitudes connect with the gathered data.

After asking the standard questions about students' intentions for their essays, I usually listened with an administrative ear, ready to prescribe solutions or suggest ideas before they had time to draw their own conclusions. However, I needed to change that attitude and listen with patience and respect instead of jumping in with remedies. Students need time to voice an informal, personal reflection about their paper. What is more, our critical listening may help writers realize that their own viewpoint is vital. Unless they do become aware that this reflection and decision-making is *required*, student writers will continue to produce skimpy essays that never quite get through to their audiences.

In *Writing to Learn* (NY: Harper and Row, 1988), William Zinsser neatly describes this mediational process in which experienced writers take part: "Writing is a tool that enables people in every discipline to wrestle with facts and ideas....It forces us to keep asking, 'Am I saying what I want to say?' " (49). Our carefully phrased questions, then, can teach student writers to engage in a mental wrestling match between the impressions of their inner selves and what their research shows until they form a link between the two. Often, students aren't aware that they need to take a closer look at their own attitudes until they come to the writing center with assignments returned to them for revision. Most instructors add comments that beg for a thesis. One professor simply wrote: "Get a hold of yourself! What are you trying to say here?" While some papers may lack direction, students have at least gone some distance with the topic; and ideas that may have been forming below the surface of awareness are, at this later point, more readily hauled up through mediational questions.

On the other hand, with students who come to the center and have not yet been able to get any decisive ideas down on paper, I have learned to ask why they think their topic is so difficult to write about. One student, whose subject was gun control, replied: "There isn't anything new that hasn't already been written about this issue!" But even her discouraging remark was useful later because she incorporated that thought into a catching opening statement. Upon further reflection, she composed a tentative thesis (based on her feelings) on the importance of weighing the facts. The writer then found she needed to continue a more focused gathering of information so that she could indeed help her reader with the "weighing."

Again, it is important with indecisive papers that outside sources of facts and opinions are reviewed in light of the student's impressions. We might ask general questions like, "What aspects of this issue seem important to you?" Or, "What opinions do you think are strong; which ones seem weak?" Such inquiries also show students that it is not necessary to always be original; for writers can, of course, use the views of others as long as they are properly cited. The writer's task of providing insight comes when explaining why specific opinions should be taken into account. But this task will seem more possible if we discuss the data in ways that cultivate some definite conclusions by the writer.

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

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

Two recent tutorials may help to explain how mediation can lead student writers to form an alliance between their own attitudes and their stated proposals. I have simplified what I see as the students' thinking processes; but the crux of all this is that by either finding or creating a link to the self, their papers became stronger. In the first instance, one student hooked on to the idea that a current perfume advertisement is harmful to younger teens because it is presented in a way that predicts certain popularity and admiration. This is possibly a valid proposal, but her arguments lacked conviction. After voicing her feelings, the writer's real impression turned out to be that the ad is not only fresh and appealing, but the attached "sniff" test actually compelled her to buy the product for the first time. And she said she plans to buy it again. Her own experience, then, is not that some young teenager will be misled by the advertisement; but rather that she felt it was helpful, and she was clear about why. Thus, her chosen stance for her final draft (that the ad was an effective marketing tool) was more convincing because she focused on her own impressions.

On a more serious topic, another writer's proposal seemed on solid ground, but the personal feelings he expressed didn't seem to connect with his research. His thesis was that rape is a brutal crime which has nothing to do with sexual motives. Yet, at several points, his tone and language revealed that he saw women's seductive behavior as the cause of many rape cases. I asked the writer if he could tell me how he knew that such statements as "These women had to pay the price for their seductiveness" were accurate. He answered that he didn't know if such statements were true, but that they just seemed right to him. I then asked, in view of the facts he showed me, if he could see any problem in expressing those particular ideas in his essay. This input steered the writer into a mental mediation between his own attitude (the way some women dress and behave may cause them to be the victims of rape), and his gathered research (rape is motivated not by women's seductive behavior, but by other, more complex factors). In light of the information he gathered for the assignment, and with increased awareness through mediation, the student found that his own impressions were not as fixed in his mind as they had been. Thus, by no longer opposing his research with statements that blamed the victims, his paper became more persuasive.

Unfortunately, it is not likely that anyone could construct a proven set of mediational questions. The tutor's background, the writing assignment, and the writer's experiences are variables which cause each session to take on a life of its own. However, some possible approaches I've borrowed from our veteran tutors are: "In reading this, I've learned.... Is that what you intended?" Or, "In reading this, I'm still not sure what you believe. Can you think of another way to express what you mean?" Or, "What else could you add?" If the student is still in the pre-writing stage, I use the repeat back or paraphrase technique to help students reflect on their impressions: "From what you are saying, it seems that you feel that...." Our purpose is to form questions and statements that lead to a more insightful communication.

Finally, we realize we are asking student writers to look at their personal beliefs. This can be disconcerting for some clients. Consequently, if we are to encourage honest appraisals, we must be sensitive to their responses. Again, William Zinsser is helpful in reminding us of our supportive role as tutors of writing. He refers to the "magnitude of problems" in dealing with papers that are not well written, but he offers this ideal: "the writing teacher's ministry is not just to the words but to the person who wrote the words . . . Through the writing of our students we are reminded of their individuality" (48). For me, Zinsser's insight underscores why our mediational questions (those that do not veer writers toward any particular point of view) serve our clients best. We are modeling a process that helps writers intervene for themselves so that they can generate an ongoing, serious assessment of what their own values are. How true the professor's simple instructions were: writers do need to "get a hold" of their self. For it is that cognitive activity which leads to writing with conviction.

Using mediational questions to help students assess their values, and listening with respect while they do, are not new methods, and they are not easy to carry out. But it is rewarding when writers start tapping into what it is they have created and stored inside. We reinforce self-reliance when students' compositions begin to matter not only to their audiences, but to themselves as well.

Sylvia Salsbury
University of Toledo
Toledo, Ohio

The Silent Tutor: Using Patterns to Teach Writing

Picture this scene: A student walks into the writing center with a handful of critical essays and an armful of books. The student has in his folder a requirement for a paper in U.S. history. The requirements are as follows: Select a major historical article for study. Write a two-page essay that provides the following information: 1) a summary of the document or article that you read; 2) the historical context for the information; 3) the questions asked by the author or the questions answered by the author; and 4) your observations or analysis of what you've read.

The students looks at you and asks, "Where do I begin?"

At the County College of Morris, I answer the question with the following comments: "Would you like to see a sample from our "Grade A" file? Your professor submitted a sample of a similar type of assignment to the Writing Center. Do you think reading it might help?" Never have I heard a student say, "No."

I call the Grade A file my "Silent Tutor." The file contains writing assignments submitted by faculty to the Writing Center for students to study. It contains basic writing assignments like lab reports, response papers, and term papers. Maxine Hairston would describe the content as Level II writing or writing that "requires the writer's attention but is SELF-Limiting" (113). In this form of writing, the content is set as well as the pattern of presentation. In other words, professors expect students to do the required reading and present their findings in a prearranged format. As Hairston notes, " a substantial part of college writing that students do outside English classes—and even much in English courses—is Class II, self-limiting writing" (116). I agree.

For students who know the formats, the Level II writing assignments pose no problems. These students do not visit the Writing Center. For the others, those who do not know the formats for Level II writing, I have developed the Grade A file. The Grade A file utilizes a well-known rule used by professional writers: read a sample of a successful submission before you submit your writing to an editor. If professionals follow that rule, and they do, shouldn't students have the opportunity to follow a similar rule? If a professor serves as editor and corrects and grades content and grammar, shouldn't a student be allowed to see a sample of what a professor considers highly acceptable? I thought so. When I mentioned the idea to a few professors at the college, they agreed and helped me develop the file. Currently, the Writing Center has 51 Grade A files from 27 departments.

When I formed the Grade A file, I did not know it had a basis in learning theory. I have since discovered it does. In 1959, Edward T. Hall, in *The Silent Language*, advanced a tripartite theory of learning that he developed with George L. Trager, an anthropologically trained linguist. Hall gives the name "informal learning" to the part of the theory that relates to learning from models. As Hall says, "Whole clusters of related activities are learned at a time, in many cases without the knowledge that they are being learned at all or that there are patterns or rules governing them" (70). In other words, the person learns by looking and observing and mimicking. As Hall further explains, "a great many people recognize the validity of using models as the major instrument of informal learning" (71).

This is the type of learning the Grade A file provides. Students consult the file at any step in the writing process. The student who comes into the center with no direction and plenty of questions leaves with an understanding of how to arrange the material for a written presentation. Students who compare a draft of their material with the sample in our Grade A file see the inadequacies of their method of organizing and realize very quickly the value of presenting the information in a way similar to the model. Usually, though, the students asking to see the Grade A files have done the required thinking about the subject or have completed their research on the subject. Students read the sample assignment for clues to solve their difficulties in presenting information they have researched or thought about in a written format. By reading the sample, stu-

dents learn the level of diction, the amount of supporting details needed, the form for documentation, and hundreds of little details that no tutor can provide. Usually, after viewing the Grade A file, students leave the center with a strong direction in which to begin writing or rewriting.

All faculty members who submit an assignment to us do so with an understanding that the sample will not leave the Writing Center. Also, the faculty members agree not to assign Grade A material as the subject for an assignment. For example, one history professor has on file a critical book review of H. Stuart Hughes's *History as Art and Science.* When he assigns a critical book review, he allows the student to write on any book of relevance related to the course with the exception of Hughes's *History as Art and Science.* That simple rule ends the threat of plagiarism.

Viewed from a tutor's point of view, the Grade A file is a great asset. For example, one history professor at the college gives the following written instructions for a critical book report:

> Because a book review is generally brief, come to the point directly and confine yourself to a small number of supporting examples. It should be clear to the instructor not only that you have read the book(s) but also that you have thought about what you have read and have used your own experience and critical faculties in formulating your comments.

To a student who lacks confidence in writing, this paragraph paralyzes the mind. What does it mean? How do I do all this? The task before the student looks enormous. When the tutor gives the student the Grade A file, the mystery disappears. By its presence, the Grade A file assures the student that the requirements for the assignment can be met in the specified word limit. Questions for where to begin and what to say begin to disappear. In other words, the Grade A files remove much of the tension and distress associated with writing. It focuses discussions with tutors by providing the student and the tutor with a common point of reference.

More important, the Grade A file provides students with an alternate method to learn information. Instead of having classroom writing instructions repeated by tutors in the Writing Center, the student is given an option of learning the information in another format: seeing a sample of a similarly completed assignment. For some students, this is a preferred way of learning. By studying and mimicking the sample assignment, they find the freedom to express their ideas. While this approach to writing instruction has been frowned on by researchers in composition theory who believe that writing is a process of discovery, I find, nevertheless, that for students who do basic writing—writing where they know what they want to say—the Grade A file is an asset. It provides the student with the vehicle for communicating ideas.

At our Writing Center, the Grade A file is a silent, but highly effective tutor. It takes the guesswork out of writing. The end result is more focused tutoring and better student writing.

Alexander J. Kucsma
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21st Wyoming Conference on English

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Laramie, WY

"Coming of Age"

For further information, contact Kathy Evertz or Cathy Kunce, Dept. of English, University of Wyoming, P.O. Box 3353, Laramie, WY 82071-3353 (307-766-6486).

Writing Center Ethics

One of the truly interesting, yet infinitely annoying, aspects of this column (as I'm discovering even in these early stages of its existence) is the problem of trying to focus on a single ethical issue and write about it in a way that doesn't dredge up half a dozen other complex questions and ethical issues as I go.

When I began thinking about this month's column, for example, I had a fairly clear issue in mind to discuss. Something odd had happened in the writing center I direct, something that raised a pretty clear ethical question about the confidentiality of conference sessions, and I didn't foresee much trouble talking about the issue or the principles that informed the decision I made. Nevertheless, once I began writing, what started out as a simple column about a single facet of the rather broad topic of "confidentiality in the writing center" quickly became bogged down in a morass of interrelated issues that all played a part in making an "ethical" decision about the situation I was faced with. I couldn't get to the specific topic I wanted to address without saying something about the general ethics of the writing conference (as I see it), the place of the writing center in a larger institutional framework, the relationship that tutors and directors have with students, instructors, and administrators, and a whole host of miscellaneous, but nevertheless important, factors that help me define the standards by which I judge a particular decision or course of action to be either ethical or unethical. Rather than write a 15-page column that tries to cover all this material before getting to my ultimate point, I've opted to treat each part individually, over the course of the next several columns. Eventually, I will get to a description of the odd situation that spurred all this discussion and speculation, but for now let me ask for your indulgence and patience as I piece through the ethical framework.

Part I: Lying to Ourselves and Others

Those of us who work in writing centers frequently wax altruistic about what we do in our conferences with student writers. We talk about how we provide a warm refuge from the cold, impersonal approach to learning common in most classrooms; how we present ourselves not as "teachers" but as "knowledgeable peers" who collaborate with rather than lecture to the students we see. We often take pride in the liberties that conferencing allows us: we speak glowingly of how the lack of classroom structure frees us from a concern for grades and course-specific agendas; how we can work closely with individual students on a single piece of text, being completely open and honest in our conversations and discussions of drafts; how the structure and environment of the writing center deconstructs the traditional classroom environment, decenters authority, and places the bulk of the responsibility for learning upon the student. Almost none of these claims are true, of course.

Take the issue of honesty, for example. We are by no means completely honest with students. In fact, our dishonesty extends over a wide range of topics. There are subjects we choose explicitly not to talk about; there are topics we subtly avoid; there are questions we refuse to answer; there are, if the truth be told, things we baldfacedly lie about to students. Just a few examples: we choose not to talk about the instructors whose classes the students are from, we avoid discussing the quality of the assignments that students are asked to fulfill, we refuse to answer questions about what grade we think a given paper deserves, and we often lie to students about what we *really* think about the quality of their drafts. Is it unethical for us to do these things? Not necessarily.

We compromise our "complete" honesty for two basic reasons, the first of which is altruistic—and therefore potentially dangerous—and the second of which is pragmatic—and therefore equally dangerous. The altruistic reason for not being completely honest with our students derives from the belief that we are pursuing a "greater good," a long-term goal that will

ultimately prove to be of greater benefit to students' learning and writing than the "benefit" of complete honesty. For instance, rather than telling novice writers that their drafts are severely flawed, simplistic, and riddled with error—even when they are—we frame our actions in accordance with a long-term goal that takes precedence over simple honesty. That is, we want to build up writers' confidence, to help them feel that they can be successful when they write; we don't want to discourage them with voluminous criticism. So, we withhold most of the comments we could make about their drafts, center our attention on one or two of the problems that demand immediate attention, and make sure to compliment the essays' strengths, sometimes manufacturing wonderfully generic praise such as, "your paper has a lot of good points" or "your draft is off to a good start." Does this do students a service? Perhaps and perhaps not. I've read as many student comments that panned tutors for "not being critical enough" as I have that praised them for "making me see that my draft wasn't completely hopeless." The danger of altruism, as I hinted above, is not only the danger of self-delusion about benefits and effects but the aphoristic danger of "the ends justifying the means."

The second reason for compromising our honesty is pragmatic, the result of our multiple and sometimes conflicting responsibilities to institutions and groups of people other than the students we meet in conferences. We are not completely independent of institutional concerns, as much as we might wish to be or even imagine ourselves to be. We operate within institutions; we are expected to serve the needs of students, faculty, and administrators that make up those institutions; and most significantly, we are funded by institutions which claim, in return for that funding, some power over our operations and oversight over our procedures. Sometimes the manner in which that power is exercised is shortsighted, uninformed, and infuriating, but even the most enlightened and limited exercise of institutional power exerts an influence on the scope and direction of the ethics we can uphold in a writing center. Similarly, in order to be successful within an academic institution, we must maintain positive relations with faculty members. We depend upon them and their support for our existence. If we alienate them by, among other things, criticizing their assignments or belittling their grading practices in conferences with students, we cut our own throats. Once again, we often make some of our ethical compromises out of enlightened self-interest. As with altruism, however, self-interest is a dangerous thing. We have to determine in our own minds what ethical principles transcend self-interest and the supposed needs of faculty and administrators whose agendas are their own.

In sum, then, ethics in the writing center are complex, often relative, and always situational. We sometimes compromise a few of our generally-held principles when they conflict with other principles or goals we believe are more worthy of pursuit or which are forced upon us by circumstances beyond our direct control. In my next column, I will explore in more detail some of the ethical dimensions of our relations with institutions as well as the specific conflicts that are engendered by our differing goals and purposes.

Michael Pemberton
University of Illinois, Urbana

Call for Papers

4th Annual Conference on the Teaching of Grammar in Grades K-College

June 25-26, 1993
Williamsport, PA

The primary focus of the conference will be grammar in the curriculum, but any proposals related to pedagogical grammar will be considered. Deadline: April 1, 1993.

For further information contact Ed Vavra, Pennsylvania College of Technology, DIF 112, One College Avenue, Williamsport, PA 17701 (phone: 717-326-3761, Ext. 7736. FAX: 717-327-4503)

The Tutor as Hard Laborer

My brother-in-law spends twelve-hour days ripping out leaking storage containers under gas stations and installing uncontaminated replacements. He comes home filthy, smelling of gasoline and ready to die from exhaustion. My neighbor gets up at four in the morning to load fifty-pound boxes onto UPS trucks, then spends the weekend resting on his back. A friend of mine from high school manages to feed and care for four wild children under the age of seven, and she nearly collapses from the effort at the end of each day. In contrast, I spend my time listening to students and reading half-written essays in a quiet, climate-controlled room.

I know that many of my friends and relatives think I have a soft job. They think nothing could be less demanding than the tutoring of students in a comfortable room. I believe, however, that tutoring students can be even more difficult than lugging air conditioners onto housetops or driving schoolbuses filled with fighting children. What can make tutoring difficult is not the frequent computer breakdowns (even those in which students lose entire research papers) or surprise visits by the board of regents, or overscheduled hours, or absent co-workers. Tutors can handle all these situations fairly well. What does make tutoring arduous is the inevitable identification with students who have stories that demand a tutor's emotional fortitude. Tutors cannot forget these students or their stories; the stories adhere permanently to a vital part of a tutor's being.

How can one treat lightly a story like Denise's? Denise was assigned an essay on "relationships." She had been involved in only one relationship. She had dated a man for a year, and during all that time he had been polite, gentle, kind—everything she had hoped for. They married. On their wedding night he beat her unmercifully and did so every day until she finally left him. Worse, perhaps, than the pain from the beatings was the surprise, the disbelief, the utter horror of discovering a sadistic Mr. Hyde lurking beneath the mask of a considerate Dr. Jekyll. Now, truly, how can a tutor bring up the subject of verb tense shifts after reading through a story like Denise's?

And how can a tutor presume to discuss unclear pronoun reference with students like Mary, whose first story described, in a caustically humorous tone, a trip she took with her mentally disabled teenaged daughter, a trip to New York from South Dakota, a trip through Harlem to an unfamiliar and extremely septic hospital? Every detail was described in an almost farcical way. The pain of her situation, the torment of loving and hating her daughter at the same time, the bitter questions about meaning and purposelessness all burned through the lines of the essay. Suddenly, pronouns seemed trivial.

Is a tutor simply to listen and nod? Should a tutor, instead, develop a rough, self-protective barrier, knowing that any help with writing skills will allow these students to express their stories even more forcefully? Tutors find themselves sandwiched between a need to be effective instructors and a need to be sensitive listeners. Can a tutor be both?

When a disillusioned student writes a wrenching narrative, describing how girlfriend after girlfriend has cheated on him, or when a hostile student, laid off from his third job, writes a disconnected attack on society, or when a tired student walks in with a paper about her alcoholic husband and her fruitless attempts to reform him, can a tutor be faithful to both the personal and the scholastic needs of that student? In other words, is it possible for a tutor to be both a good teacher and a decent human being at the same time?

Of course it's possible. But it's work, and one of the most difficult kinds of work around.

Donna Marmorstein
Northern State University
Aberdeen, SD

Tutors' Column

The Payoff

As usual, the writing center is abuzz with activity. My fellow students are happily attending to their new-found responsibilities as tutors. It seems that everyone except me is constructively occupied, either untangling a snarl from their tutee's writing or disposing of some clerical duty for the center's secretary.

I am planted by the doorway, waiting for my phantom tutee, the "no-show." No-shows are quickly becoming the norm for me, and they are beginning to make me bitter. On Tuesdays and Thursdays you can find me sitting by the doorway, thinking about the enriching experiences I could have, assuming that my tutees ever bother to show up. I put in my time, then skulk over to my peer tutoring class to listen to the other students' triumphs. Most classes go something like this:

Our chairs are arranged in a semi-circle, the classic position for sharing. Our professor calls the class to order. "Has anyone had a tutoring experience that he or she would like to share with us?" Johnny Perfect raises his hand obsequiously. "I had a wonderful experience," says Johnny. He tells us that, last week, he transformed an ESL student into a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist. "Go to hell, Johnny," I mutter under my breath.

From a corner of the room, a petite voice pierces the air. It's little Mary Pablum, looking stylish in her 4.0 GPA. "Last Thursday, I helped a Swahili student understand Kierkegaard by translating one of his dissertations from its original text!" she says. "Get a life," I hiss. Before I know it, the class is over. I leave, wondering what it is that I'm supposed to be getting out of this course. Then, one day, I find out.

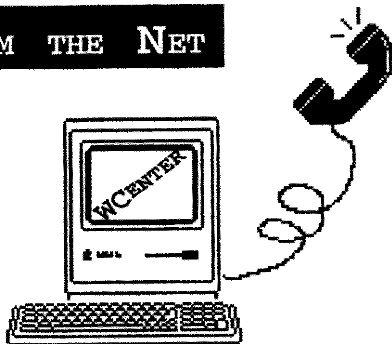
Back in the writing center (by the door), I am astonished when one of my tutees actually shows up. Her name is Tina, and she's having trouble with English 100 (a remedial English course). So far, Tina hasn't received a single passing grade. Looking over her work, however, I don't see any major problems—she just needs a little help organizing her thoughts. We spend the entire tutoring session working on essay format.

The remainder of the week goes like clockwork. My other tutees continue to ignore their standing appointments, and I begin to appreciate their consistency. Now I can concentrate on Tina's progress, and when she appears as scheduled, I can scarcely contain my excitement. This time, Tina brings in a rough draft of her next assignment, and we dig right into our work. Again, Tina needs some assistance with her organization, so we spend thirty minutes hammering out an outline. At the end of our session, I can't help but wonder what Tina's grade will be.

As soon as Tina arrives for her next session, I pull her aside and ask, "Well, how did you do?" Without saying a word, Tina takes her essay from her notebook. Hastily, I flip through her paper, looking for an A- or a B+ proudly emblazoned across the back page. It's a C+. I start to apologize, but something stops me. Tina is smiling. She's actually thanking me because she isn't failing anymore. That's when it hits me: one student can make the difference between a waste of time and a meaningful tutoring experience. Students like Tina make it easy for me to get over the people who don't show up. Now I know that when you're a tutor, your real triumphs come in bits and pieces.

Richard Baker
Peer Tutor
St. John Fisher College
Rochester, NY

VOICES FROM THE NET



---ERIC CRUMP

Talk about Talk in the Writing Center

Talking is the real business of writing centers, or at least it is "how" writing center business is conducted. Stephen North, in "The Idea of a Writing Center" (*College English* 46 [1984]: 433-46), suggests that if you boil the job down to its essence, what writing center people mainly do is "talk about writing." And of course the challenge this situation presents, the one we most often discuss in our literature, is how talk and writing interact, how talk can be translated into writing. But how often do we talk about talk itself?

The subject came up on WCenter[1] last May when Elaine Dodson asked for advice about how to deal with a woman who was referred to her writing center for help with non-standard oral expression.[2] The woman was a former welfare recipient who was working for a non-profit agency as a secretary/receptionist. Elaine noted that the agency's staff apparently thought the woman was good at her job, but some staff members were concerned enough about her oral grammar that they brought the problem to the attention of the director, who sought Elaine's help.

It may seem a little odd, at first, for someone to seek help from a "writing" center for a problem with the grammar of "spoken" language. It's not that the two forms of communication are unrelated. Writing is a descendant of speech. But in the academy, the two are often firmly segregated by disciplinary boundaries.

The request for assistance posed to Elaine shows, however, that the rest of the world doesn't always make such fine distinctions, as any English scholar or writing center specialist might attest after a social event attended by lay folk. At my grandmother's 75th birthday party this past summer, three cousins and two uncles proclaimed loudly that they would have to mind their grammar (the oral kind) in my presence. I simply camouflaged my gritted teeth with a smile, but Elaine was faced with a situation requiring a more helpful response. Below are some of the suggestions she received from people on WCenter.

From: John Edlund, Wed, 20 May 1992

I once dealt with a situation like this, but it turned out that the individual didn't really have a big problem. The other employees in the office were hypercritical of this individual's language for other reasons.

It is likely that this woman speaks a non-standard dialect, and if so words like "bad" and "correctness" are problematic. The language that she uses at home is inappropriate at work, but it is not "wrong."

In a writing center situation, I would get this person to read more standard English, mostly newspapers and magazines, whatever was of interest. And I would have her write responses to the reading, and discuss vocabulary and grammatical forms with the tutor. I would try to get her to see standard English as a new dialect that she could learn, rather than trying to eradicate the old.

I don't know of a particular book. Does anyone else?

From: Dorothy H. Ross, Wed, 20 May 1992

You might try some of the English-as-a second-language books. I have found them to be quite helpful. Also listening to all-news radio stations sometimes works pretty well. I have also found that explaining subject/verb agreement in terms of confirming the number of objects being discussed to be pretty helpful. In other words, I write on the board "The dogs chews the bone." The question that follows

is—"how many dogs are there?" The answer is we don't know because the noun tells us there are many dogs and the verb tells us there is only one dog. And this is why subjects and verbs have to agree. That way there is no discussion of "standard" English and the lesson then continues on with the express goal of getting accurate information across. I hope it works for you.

From: Jeanne Simpson, Wed, 20 May 1992

Hi Elaine—
My advice is to wait until you talk to her. Get her to talk to you, tell you about herself. Don't assume anything until you hear what she actually does, what her grammar is actually like. Work on what she actually does. Chances are there are only some really egregious errors—it's hard to live in the age of mass media and have completely bad grammar, after all.

I'd also stay away from books, per se. They're intimidating. Maybe tapes? She has to HEAR the changes as well as see them. I'd use magazine articles and tape recorder, myself. I know the content of *Reader's Digest* is often annoying, but as a model for the sort of standard dialect expected in business, it isn't bad.

I always worry when people report someone else's bad grammar to me. People focus on the damnedest things, sure that lightning will strike persons who confuse "will" and "shall" and stuff like that. Again, my suggestion is to spend a fair amount of time just listening to her talk, and then what you need to work on may be pretty clear.

At this point, Claire Pedretti added a comment (Wed, 20 May 1992)[3] suggesting that the best approach might be to portray the task at hand in positive terms—acquiring a new language ability—rather than negatively, as if the woman's dialect was a liability. She suggested that tutors listen for something the woman's dialect did better than standard English does and use it to illustrate that the problem is one of appropriateness, not correctness.

She also suggested a clothing analogy that might help the woman understand the way people adjust their language, depending on the situation: tuxedoes for formal occasions, jeans for picnics.

Although she couldn't name specific references, Claire mentioned that she thought Sandra Savignon had written something on "communicative competence" that she thought might be helpful.

From: Joyce Kinkead, Wed, 20 May 1992

What about a trip to the theatre to see MY FAIR LADY?

Mail is slow coming from TTU, so I just got yesterday's discussion about Elaine's oral communication problem. By the time this gets to you all, it may be dated badly. Oh well. All I was going to add to the wonderful suggestions posted so far is: talk. Seems like it might help to have the woman read *Reader's Digest* or *Newsweek* aloud so her tongue and teeth could get practice shaping words the way her ears and brain receive them from those standard English sources. Maybe tape her talking and tape her reading and let her hear the difference.

It's an interesting challenge you have, Elaine. Please let us know how things happen.

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[1]WCenter@TTUVM1 is an electronic forum for writing center directors, writing assistants and student writers. It is managed by Fred Kemp, Texas Tech University director of composition.

[2]Elaine's note to the list is paraphrased because she was not available to give permission to quote her directly. Getting permission to publish in print these network conversations is a practice we've adopted in deference to the fact that they have characteristics of both public and private communications.

[3]Claire's contribution to the discussion is paraphrased here because she was unavailable to give permission to quote her directly.

Calendar for Writing Center Associations (WCAs)

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

Minutes of National Writing Centers Association (NWCA) Executive Board Meeting Nov. 20, 1992 Louisville, NCTE

Board Members Present: Pat Dyer, Lady Falls Brown, Nancy Grimm, Lois Green, Christina Murphy, Byron Stay, Joseph Saling, Diana George, Pam Farrell, Steve Fields, Sally Fitzgerald, Ray Wallace, Al DeCiccio, Jim Upton.

Guests Present: Kate Latterell, Bob Child, Rob Wood, Eric Hobson, Judy Kristl, Pat Stoddart, Tom MacLennan, Michael Rossi, James McDonald, Kathleen Shine Cain, Donna Reiss.

President Pat Dyer called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. Minutes of the March meeting were approved.

Executive Secretary's Report
Nancy Grimm, executive secretary, reported a treasury balance of $4,642.50. She reminded members that starter folders for people starting new writing centers are available from her. Scholarships for graduate students doing dissertation research on writing centers are granted yearly. Applications are available from Grimm. At the March meeting, the annual award for writing center scholarship will be presented. Nominations for this award should be sent to Lady Falls Brown before January 22. Several regions must appoint new representatives to the board for positions expiring this year, including CUNY, Midwest, Southeastern, Pacific Coast, and Mid-Atlantic. There will be an election in the spring for one at-large position and for the community college position. A nomination form is available from Nancy Grimm.

Reports
The Writing Center Journal. Diana George reported that the editors had reconstituted the editorial board, and she distributed the list of the new board members. She also reported that the acceptance rate for the *Journal* was about 30%.

The Writing Center Directory. Pam Farrell indicated that copies of the directory are available for $15. Her school still has not broken even on the printing expense. She is considering plans for an update next fall.

NCTE Workshop—1992. Lady Falls Brown reported that over 30 people attended the workshop on writing and higher level thinking skills which was designed by Pat Stoddart. The audience included teachers from elementary, secondary, and college levels.

CEL Presentation. Pam Farrell announced that this year's program was entitled "The Role of Computers in Leading Change in Writing Centers." She indicated that the immediate past president is responsible for maintaining this liaison with CEL.

CCCC Presentation—1993. Ray Wallace reported on plans for a session entitled "Theory

in the Writing Center" scheduled for April 2 at 5:00. A short NWCA business meeting will precede this session during which the NWCA president will present scholarship awards.

Committee Reports. There were reports from three of the standing committees. Al DeCiccio encouraged members to attend an ESL session on Sunday morning at 8:30. Eric Hobson reported that he had had several contacts from people interested in starting a writing center. Ray Wallace announced that there will be an all day pre-convention workshop that will address writing across the curriculum interests.

New Business

1. Nominations for outstanding writing center scholarship for 1992 should be sent to Lady Falls Brown. Nominations are not limited to journals and newsletters affiliated with NWCA.

2. The 1993 NCTE workshop will be planned by Ray Wallace. Lady Falls Brown stressed the importance of designing a program suitable for elementary through college levels.

3. Regional representatives reported the following news:

- The Mid-Atlantic sponsored a two-day conference last April with Stephen North as the keynote speaker. Byron Stay reported that next year's conference will be at Villanova with Elaine Maimon as keynoter.

- Joe Saling reported that the eighth New England conference was held last April with Anne Gere as keynote speaker. Approximately 170 people participated. The next conference will feature Muriel (Mickey) Harris.

- Tom MacLennan reported that the Southeastern conference with Chris Thaiss as featured speaker was held in April. This region will switch to a fall conference next year in Atlanta.

- Bob Child reported that East Central will hold their next conference in March with two speakers—Jeanne Simpson and James Berlin. The conference will be at Ball State in Muncie.

- Nancy Grimm reported that the Midwest Conference was held in St. Paul in October with Stephen North as keynote speaker. David Healy was conference planner and host.

- Jim McDonald reported that the South Central Conference will switch from fall to spring. This year's conference will feature Jeanne Simpson at Oklahoma State on April 16 and 17.

4. Byron Stay was nominated for the position of second vice-president by Pam Farrell. Eric Hobson seconded the nomination. Stay was elected by acclamation of the membership.

5. The spring meeting of NWCA will take place at CCCC in San Diego.

Pat Dyer adjourned the meeting at 7:10 after passing the gavel to the next NWCA president, Lady Falls Brown.

Respectfully submitted,
Nancy Grimm
NWCA Executive Secretary

Planning for Computers in the Writing Center: First Drafts

A recent posting on the WCenter network posed a dream scenario: if funding were available, how would you design and equip a writing center/computer lab? The responses included discussion of the merits of various kinds of computer hardware and so on.

Even if one buys the very best computer equipment and software with every kind of bell and whistle, the setting for the equipment is also important. Although educational software is becoming more and more sophisticated, we must keep in mind that, generally, computers are designed to be used in business settings. That is the biggest market. Computers placed in a writing center are going to be used in a somewhat different way than they would be in business. The hardware is adaptable through the application chosen for it. But the setting is also adaptable, and that setting needs careful attention if computers are to be used to maximum effectiveness in writing centers.

Too often, computers are put where there is space with little or no attention to factors

beyond the proximity of electrical outlets. More careful consideration of what will be involved is in order. Why not take time to visualize or even role-play a tutorial with the new computers before buying them? Who will use them? How? How often? What is the proposed setting like under the worst possible conditions—hot days, cold days, rainy days, crowded days? What other things happen in the area? Are those activities likely to interfere with computer use? How? What are possibilities for expansion? How will the sudden and quick changes in technology be handled?

Even as these issues are addressed, there are a few basics that always apply:

1. Computer equipment, even the best, breaks down under heavy traffic. Plan for at least a couple of computers to be "down" on any given day.

2. Printers are noisy, especially dot-matrix printers. They are cheap and accommodate multiple drafts easily, but they make a racket. Even laser printers hum and whirr. Considerable noise can be generated by five or more keyboards clicking away. Plan for noise control by careful placement of printers and use of soundproofing materials.

3. Computers are hot. The more you add, the hotter it gets. At the same time, air conditioning in universities is always unreliable (this is Simpson's Corollary to Murphy's Law). Plan for good, natural ventilation.

4. Most computer stations are designed so that students must work alone. The design is borrowed from work stations in business and industry, where solitary work is apparently the norm. No provision is made for a tutor or other friendly character sitting next to students. Lined-up carrels or rows of monitors are the worst configuration for this problem.

I always wanted "islands" with maybe four or five computers arranged in an X or a small circle (printer in middle, perhaps?), with room for a stool with rollers to be placed next to a computer station. Over-the-shoulder tutoring tends to be unsuccessful—minimal eye contact, physical awkwardness, and the instinctive dislike of having someone peering over the shoulder all conspire against it; yet most computer stations permit only this arrangement. While lines of stations permit many computers in a small space, I question the instructional efficiency of this approach. Use of laptop computers may obviate some of this problem. However, the use of desktop computers, especially those connected to area networks, is likely to continue for some time.

Every computer lab I've been in (none of them state-of-the-art) has been overcrowded, with equipment jammed into every nook or cranny and no room for human beings to move around easily. My most heartfelt wish in a lab would be for SPACE. Space provides flexibility, both for changes in technology and for addressing new and unanticipated problems. I remember, for example, the matter of adjusting a computer station so that a wheelchair-bound student with vision impairment could use it effectively. Space for the wheelchair was more important than space for the computer.

We must remember that people, not computers, are the reason the lab exists. The goal is effective instruction, not gee-whiz technology. Writing center personnel understand this principle; they need to insist on it whenever technical staff and signers of checks become involved in the process of equipping a center.

Jeanne Simpson
Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, IL

A Mini-Course Serves Many Purposes

We at the Western Carolina University Writing Center have been experimenting with a new program over the past year. In an effort to change our image and convince students that Writing Center staff can work with a variety of college writing, not simply with freshman English essays, we have introduced a series of mini-courses dealing with common campus writing assignments. Because the courses directly address the immediate writing demands of specific classes, students quickly realize that they can benefit from our recently expanded writing center. In addition, by presenting these mini-courses directly to college classes, we are able to convince faculty that Center services are beneficial to their

students and, thus, establish stronger faculty support for our program.

For example, one of the most common undergraduate writing assignments on our campus is to have students summarize a professional journal article. To help students achieve adequate journal summaries to meet the requirements of their assignments, we present a journal summary mini-course. This course, like similar presentations on other writing assignments, takes up 30 minutes of a class period and is accompanied by a hand-out containing all points covered in the course. Usually professors schedule the course to coincide with the announcement of the writing assignment so that the information contained in the presentation is particularly relevant to the class assignment.

This mini-course combines the ideas and suggestions of many educators. Claudia Mon Pere McIsaac (17-19) points out that because of the complexity of the prose in some professional articles, summary skills should be taught sequentially, practicing first with clearly organized articles before moving to more difficult ones. Furthermore, Karl K. Taylor (389-392), in outlining the techniques employed by successful summary writers, stresses that multiple readings, sometimes four or five times, are necessary before analysis can take place and "the important points begin to stand out and the details and examples begin falling to the wayside" (391). Brenda Spatt outlines the qualities of a well written summary as being comprehensive, concise, coherent and independent. And finally, Laurence Behrens and Leonard Rosen (1-7) suggest a six-step process similar to the one adopted in this mini-course.

The course itself contains six easy steps which, when followed, should lead to an effective summary.

(1) The mini-course encourages a student to first read the article one time straight through, to turn the article over, and to write the main idea of the article in one sentence. This sentence may become the thesis sentence of the summary.

(2) The second step suggests reading the article a second time, writing marginal notes and underlining important material.

(3) Finally, the student is requested to read the article a third time so that he/she is confident the article is understood.

(4) After completing the third reading, the student writes a draft of the summary.

(5) This draft is then checked against the original article for accuracy because it is the summary writer's main responsibility to correctly reflect the original author's ideas.

(6) The summary is then revised, checking for control, brevity, and sound structure.

After talking to students who come to the Writing Center for help on journal article assignments, I have concluded that they have difficulty with the project for one of four reasons. First of all, they do not realize that summary skills, often neglected in high school, are fundamental tools for successful college writing. Not only will these skills be used in journal article assignments, but summary is the basis for paraphrased material in research papers and the review-of-the-literature sections in formal papers and theses.

Secondly, many students mistakenly think that an adequate summary of a scholarly article consists of writing one sentence about each paragraph in the original article, ignoring the organization and focus of that piece. These summaries lack structure and often distort the intent of the original author. Likewise, students often fail to realize that some articles are easier to summarize than others, either because of difficult content material or the complex writing style of the author. These inexperienced summary writers often rush out of the library wedded to the first article they find, rather than shopping for one that matches their own summary skills. Finally, many students do not realize that a summary requires thoughtful condensation of material and careful word choice. In the Writing Center, we often read nine-page summaries of five-page articles.

When presenting the course, I try to address these issues and often use an exercise suggested by Elaine P. Maimon, et al. (103-107). I have students read, or I read to them, an introduction to a statistics text by H. L. Levinson. Attempts to summarize this introduction illustrate well why students should care-

fully select an article they can understand, why they cannot use the topic sentence from every paragraph to create a summary, and why a reader must carefully read and re-read material to be effectively summarized. In other presentations I use an article suggested by the professor and, using the mini-course summary technique, write a sample for the class, or if time permits, have the class write a group summary. If the professor will devote enough time in class, we can read an article together and carefully go through the entire process so that students can practice underlining and writing marginal notes as well as writing a rough summary draft.

A mini-course such as this one fits well in many courses on our campus. I have made presentations of this course to classes in advertising, clothing and textiles, body fluids, psychology, medical records technology, geology, history, political science, health professions, sociology, economics, education, and nursing. Thus, the basic process works for summaries in most disciplines. Furthermore, this mini-course and others we present directly to classes help attract a wide range of students representing various disciplines to our Center, enabling us to better fulfill our mission as a campus-wide writing center.

Barbara B. Carter
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