

The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

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

Volume 17, Number 8

April, 1993

....from the editor....

Like many of you, I'm in the midst of interviewing (and eventually, selecting) candidates for our peer tutor training course, and I keep asking myself what traits I should be looking for. What characteristics define a tutor?

Putting together this issue of the newsletter has helped answer that question. As I proofread the articles, I began to realize that another characteristic of writing labs is that they are not just "for" writers but are also staffed "by" writers—people who not only talk about writing but are continually engaged in writing. In this issue, Cornelius Cosgrove *writes* about a document he *writes* and distributes to his department; in Eric Crump's column, a peer tutor *writes* an e-mail message asking if she can *write* on the electronic bulletin board for writing labs, WCenter; and Mary Pat Birdsall *writes* about response journals members of her staff *write* in to communicate with one another.

Writing centers, clearly, are inhabited by people who *write*—incessantly!

•Muriel Harris, editor

....inside....

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Explaining and Justifying Writing Centers: An Example

Educating students and colleagues about both the role and value of writing centers is a task that may always be with us. One of my own labors within this area was an explanation of our center first published in the composition newsletter which circulates throughout Slippery Rock University's English Department. Although the newsletter was written primarily for the edification of the English faculty, much of its substance can and will be employed in discussing our center's mission with students and colleagues across campus.

The document was also prompted by concerns frequently discussed at conferences of the East Central Writing Centers Association. Participants returned again and again to the perceptions others have of writing centers, and to the tutor qualifications and training that might fit such perceptions. It has struck me that writing center directors must be forthright at every opportunity about the vision and the theory which govern the functioning of the facilities placed in their

charge. Such a strategy seems the only way to prevent being defined in the terms of those with pedagogical approaches far different from our own, and to avoid what Karen Rodis has aptly called Expectation Conflict (46), perhaps the deadliest of the cancers that might afflict us.

It will do us little good to consider ourselves centers of collaborative learning if most students and faculty see our function as remedial and prescriptive. If we advertise ourselves as "writing experts," we must remember that the academy habitually defines competence in highly specialized terms, and that the expertise assigned to us will be narrowly linguistic in nature. A sensitivity to writing processes and rhetorical situations simply doesn't match up well with the prevailing view of knowledge, which is why we must continually approach our audience from a distinctive angle. We face a daunting rhetorical challenge, one that will invariably develop the expertise to which we truly aspire.

My document expresses our center's vision of itself in what I hope is an honest yet sensitive manner. I want to articulate points of possible agreement that may lessen the impact of points of controversy which cannot be denied. I picture what goes on between tutor and writer in terms of dialogue, process and collaboration, rather than in terms of qualifications, knowledge transmission and "standards." At the same time, I purposely avoid using words like "process" and "collaboration" because they serve as identifiers in the partisan debates which English departments have recently experienced. There's no reason to deny my historical role in these debates, but I postpone any explicit mention of it to the final segment, when my reader is perhaps more open and sympathetic than at the beginning.

Since anticipating and satisfying the idiosyncratic stylistic preferences of innumerable professors is an impossibility, I attempt to demonstrate how writing centers can more effectively complement classroom practices. I address the all too common argument that writing centers engage in a "form of plagiarism" (Behm 3), and I try, as clearly and as specifically as I can, to spell out how individual faculty can influence the functioning of our center. Slippery Rock's Writing Center is staffed primarily by graduate students who are usually, but not always, enrolled in an M.A. program in English. The staff is supplemented by under-

graduate English/Education majors who must tutor in the center as part of a practicum course in the teaching of writing. Supervision of the center is the main duty of the Freshman English Coordinator, always a tenured or tenure-track member of the English faculty periodically elected by the department. Our conferences occur on a walk-in basis. Approximately half are with freshman writing students, and the remainder are with students doing writing in close to 100 different courses taught across campus. Within the center is a computer lab containing 25 IBM Model 25 personal computers and 12 IBM Proprinters. Some conferences occur while students are developing their drafts on the computers.

I do not regard what follows as a "model" of any kind. It was meant, as indicated, "to reopen dialogue." It can also function as a stimulus for your own efforts.

Slippery Rock's Writing Center: An Explanation

Last spring the English Department faculty voted once again to place the Writing Center in my hands. I can only speculate as to why the faculty did so. Perhaps some are actually satisfied with the way the Center has operated since 1988. I suspect, in gloomier moments, that many may simply be relieved

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

that someone was willing to take the job. After three years in the department, I do know there is a wide variance in the value faculty place on the center and in the perspectives faculty have on the center's role. Since I am the person who trains and supervises the tutors who staff the center, I feel obligated to share my ideas concerning what the center does and ought to do. In doing so, I hope to reopen dialogue about the center. At the very least, faculty will be able to make a more informed choice the next time they select a Freshman English Coordinator.

I know that a predecessor to our present-day center was called the "Composition Clinic." Clinic is a word usually employed in medical settings, of course, and it could be equated with the British term, "doctor's surgery." People come to the doctor's surgery with their illnesses and injuries, in the hope that they will be made whole again or, at least, that the doctor will ensure their survival. Students came to the Composition Clinic because their professors had diagnosed their writing as in some way diseased and had prescribed a visit. Tutors would use all the therapies and pharmaceuticals at their command—usage drills, handbooks, dictionaries, and so on—to send the students back to their professors cured, or at least functioning.

This view of a writing center's role is *not* mine. I begin with the notion that every developing writer (and I realize that encompasses a considerable portion of the human race) needs not just teachers, but also readers and conversants. Teachers, no matter how hard-working and caring, are limited by tradition and time and institutional expectations in the ways they can relate to student writers. That's where writing centers come in—not as a substitute for teachers, nor as a challenge to their classroom authority, but as an educational complement. When a writer is first exploring and developing ideas, the tutor can be there as conversant—to listen, to question, to paraphrase, and to summarize, while continually encouraging the student to "get it down" and to work from a richness, rather than a paucity, of material.

Incidentally, I do not regard such assistance as "cheating," or "plagiarizing," or "writing the paper for them." The tutor is not creating the student's language, but drawing language out of the students. If a tutor-student conversation is "cheating," then so was the stimulation a Dorothy Parker or a Robert Benchley received

while sitting at the Algonquin Round Table, and so was the string of ideas triggered inside a Virginia Woolf by some passing comment of a member of the Bloomsbury Group. Some may accept that comparison, while others may scoff at it. After years of writing and teaching writing and reading about writing, I am convinced that writers at all levels need that kind of dialogue. And that writing centers are places where they should get it—from peers who know, because of training and accumulated experience, what they are about.

When the student has completed a draft, the tutor can be there as a reader—to be entertained, enlightened, bemused or mystified. As a reader, the tutor can tell the writer that more information is required or desired. As a reader, the tutor can be puzzled by a draft's apparent lack of direction or purpose. The writer might discover a purpose when hearing the tutor's honest attempts at interpretation of the draft's material. When the tutor, as reader and peer rather than teacher and tester, is clearly confused by the writer's organizational scheme, that confusion can be a more effective invitation to revise than a dozen marginal exhortations, no matter how clever or carefully crafted. In a similar way, nothing can demonstrate the importance of well wrought, grammatical sentences more forcefully than hearing a tutor stumble over sentences that are neither. Grammar and usage, punctuation and spelling come to matter because the successful creation and conveyance of meaning so obviously matters.

When the student has a nearly finished paper which needs a final polish, the tutor can be there as editor—but only as a hands-off editor whose role is more passive than active. Tutors will not proofread a writer's paper. In fact, the tutor is trained never to put a pen to a student's work. Instead, the tutor will sit with a student while she or he performs the proofreading. The tutor may point out errors, but would much prefer that students discover the errors for themselves. The tutor may hand students a dictionary or a style book, but the tutor will not try to function as one. The tutor's job is not to help the student survive one more writing assignment. The tutor's job is to help the student develop as a writer (North 438).

When I select the graduate assistants who will be tutors in the writing center, I look for applicants who can be the kinds of listeners, conversants, readers, and editors I have de-

scribed above. I look for people who will be dedicated to learning in general and to their graduate studies in particular. I look for the curious, the flexible, and the open-minded. I try to remember that graduate assistants are very much like writing teachers in one important way—they need time to grow into their jobs. They need support; they need guidance; they need encouragement.

I am not in search of replicas of myself. The mold was broken long ago and that, no doubt, is a very good thing. While I naturally train tutors to view writing conferences in a certain way, I am not interested in recruiting graduate students as foot soldiers in the intense, though not necessarily significant, battles which occasionally flare up among English professors. The very conferencing activities I've described above serve to discourage the development of ideologues. Rather, those activities make tutors yearn for the kind of knowledge, suggestion and dialogue that can inform and improve their contacts with students. For that reason, I have a few recommendations regarding how faculty might contribute to the writing center's effectiveness:

1. Get to know us.

Drop in at any time to observe what's going on. Attend one of our staff meetings. Accost me in the hall. Get to know the tutors as something more than just students who may pass through one of your graduate courses.

2. Inform us.

Pass on professional materials you think may be of particular help to us. Supply us with copies of your assignments, so tutors don't have to completely rely on the sometimes idiosyncratic interpretations they get from your students.

3. Plan with us.

Sit down with me before the semester begins to see how the center can complement what you're doing in your classroom. Realize that our tutors often possess knowledge you might be able to use. Some of our recent tutors have had experience in drama, journalism, and business. They can do more in your classes than just demonstrate WordPerfect.

Cornelius Cosgrove
Slippery Rock University
Slippery Rock, PA

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

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 1-2: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Louis, MO
Contact: Susan Sanders, Dept. of Humanities, MTU, 1400 Townsend Dr., Houghton, MI 49931 (906-487-2007)

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

We Hold These Truths to Be Sometimes Not So Self-Evident

We have been waging the battle to establish and operate our high school "Communication Resource Center" for almost a decade, and as all true learners do, we regularly assess our work. As we begin a new year, we would like to share the occasionally not so self-evident or vocalized underlying philosophy of our center and the work we do with students, teachers, and center staff/tutors.

OUR ULTIMATE GOAL IS TO BE IRRELEVANT (OR AT LEAST HAVE A DIFFERENT MISSION).

Working in our center is often most frustrating, but it is also some of the most rewarding professional work in which we engage. The successes we help students achieve, the more meaningful use of writing which we help teachers discover, and our efforts above and beyond the school day are among the most satisfying we ever experience, and while we believe that there will always be a need for writing centers as a place for writers to seek response in attaining even more effective written communication and to celebrate writing, we work toward the day that many of the activities in which we currently engage are no longer needed. We believe our major functions include helping each student become a competent and confident life-long learner and helping teachers more effectively incorporate a variety of writing into their classes. These two are obviously inter-related and will not successfully occur separately; however, we work toward making our center a place where all writers come to celebrate writing rather than a place to come for often less than enthusiastic remediation. This goal of the center as a place to celebrate writing is noble, but given the current attitudes toward education, we will not live long enough to see its attainment. However, we want to break the cycle of co-dependency too easily established in centers, and like effective parents, we will know we have been successful when we are no longer needed.

WE MUST WORK WITH THE "WRITER" TO HELP OUR CLIENTS BECOME SUCCESSFUL.

We know that most instructors will grade the "written" or the "writing," but we also know that we must work with and respond to the "writer" if we want to help our clients become independent thinkers and writers. While there are a growing number of theories and models for effective con-

ferencing, we believe and practice that effective work in our center must begin with positive and encouraging human response to the writer of the words on the page. Most of the assignments which students bring to us are those which are designed to test the writers' content learning, the "written," or to test the writers' written communication skills, the "writing," and while we try to make sure that students understand and meet the evaluation criteria for each paper, we focus on the "writer" who must come to terms with and successfully meet these imposed "written" and "writing" expectations. We do all we can to empower the writer to achieve success, but the basis of our efforts is always at the human/personal level.

WE OFFER NO GUARANTEES.

We want to make our clients independent and we work with the writer, but we try to make clear to clients that our suggestions offer no guarantees of success. We share many strategies to help students better understand the assignment, better empathize with the audience, better assess their own writing skills, use a variety of pre-writing and revision activities, and improve presentation skills, but we always try to make clear that our efforts are only suggestions. We often tell students we are like the physician who recommends diet and exercise to a client. We can make general and specific suggestions to improve thinking and writing health, but it is up to the individual to implement the suggestions which seem to be most useful for him/her.

WE DO OUR HOMEWORK.

We try to attend as many conferences and meetings and read as much as we can about learning theories, writing theories and strategies, writing center theory and administration, conference and tutor techniques, etc. Beyond these, we also keep a "file" on instructors who use writing in their classrooms. We ask for copies of all assignments which instructors use with their students, and we also keep an informal file on individual teacher expectations, grading criteria and standards, assignment or grading idiosyncrasies, and successfully completed assignments. We try to do this in the most professional manner possible, but we believe that students have a right to know as much about instructor expectation as we can ethically provide.

(Cont. on page 8)

Writing Center Ethics

In my last column, I talked a bit about the complex nature of ethics in writing centers, and a bit about the ways in which we lie—for the “best” of purposes—to ourselves and to the students we conference with. We do this for both practical and idealistic reasons, though neither of these rationales is entirely satisfying and both present clear dangers. In the future I’ll be talking more about this questionable practice among tutors as well as the circumstances under which we can (and cannot) justify it, but for now, I’m going to continue on with my larger plan: to lay some preliminary groundwork for the troublesome scenario I hinted at last month. Having already talked about some of the ethical compromises we make as writing center tutors, I now want to talk in general terms about our ethical positioning within educational institutions.

Like virtually everyone else in the world who works in a hierarchical system, those of us who work in writing centers have people placed above us who can wield power over us. For tutors, these people are usually instructors, professors, or designated directors of the center; for directors, these people are usually members of the campus administration ranging from department heads to deans to various vice-chancellors and assistant provosts. These campus administrators can, if they wish, exert a tremendous influence on writing center policies and activities. Among other things, they can tell us who’s eligible to be hired and who isn’t; they can tell us what we are allowed to pay tutors and what we aren’t; they can control our entire budget if they wish—life and death power in economic terms; and they can ask us to report on what we are doing in the center and how we are doing it.

The first two of these administrative controls are relatively minor and not often the subject of much friction between the center and central administration. (This is not to say, however, that wages are not the source of much justifiable grumbling.) Administrators have certain obligations to state governments,

labor unions, and their own governing boards about who can be hired for particular positions on campus—including the writing center—and what they can be paid. There’s not a lot of room for argument here, particularly in times when money is tight for educational institutions all across the country. Most writing center directors and tutors realize this and work grudgingly within the bounds of financial necessity. To ameliorate this condition somewhat, writing center directors are usually given a relatively free hand in how to allocate their personnel budgets, and this tends to lessen the feeling that the writing center’s destiny is entirely under the control (if not the thumb) of upper-level administrators. Fortunately, most administrators don’t really care about the petty details of running a writing center, so they resist the urge to micro-manage and leave us to our own devices.

But not entirely. As units that receive yearly budget allocations and that provide services to a broad cross-section of the student body, writing centers—like virtually every other unit on campus—are understandably held accountable on some level to the powers that be. We have to keep detailed records about the students we see and share much of that information with the administrators who provide us with the money we need to keep our doors open and our paychecks coming in. Administrators are accountable to others too, and they can use the facts and figures we provide them about student numbers, majors, ethnic backgrounds, and grade levels to support their own requests for funds from state legislators and grant providers. In this way, the information writing centers provide to administrators can work for the benefit of both. Consistent numbers can be used to argue for constant allocations; bigger numbers can be used to argue for budget increases.

Yet this is only one possible consequence of the pursestring/information dialectic and a rather innocuous one at that. We surely cannot ignore the latent potential for coercion

and manipulation (I hesitate to call it blackmail) of people in the writing center which is inherent in the unequal balance of power here. Imagine a scenario, not an unrealistic one given the stories I've heard from some of our colleagues, where an individual or group of individuals in the upper levels of campus administration wants information we're not prepared to give. What if they ask for access to our conferencing files? What if they ask for a report on conferences with a particular student? What if they want information about specific instructors and their assignments?

What if they imply strongly (I hesitate to call it threaten) that there might be financial consequences for refusal to comply? Or legal action? Or a negative tenure review? What should our response be?

Clearly, there are no simple or easy answers to these questions. Ethical decisions about what to do will often depend on the context and specific circumstances involved as well as the value judgements of the person in the writing center who has to take a stand one way or the other. The more important and general points I think people should keep in mind, however, are three: (1) Writing centers have an implicit contractual relationship with their home institutions; by accepting and spending the money which is allocated to them, writing centers obligate themselves to provide an acceptable "return" for that investment, and they also obligate themselves to provide periodic reports on how that money is spent and how well they are meeting student needs. (2) Writing center personnel and campus administrators may have divergent views about the extent and scope of this reporting responsibility (and other matters as well). (3) Administrators can do more to us than we can do to them.

We should always keep in the forefront of our minds, then, the fact that ethical decisions can have very real and perhaps very unpleasant consequences. For some of us, this prospect may be frightening and intimidating. For others, it may merely strengthen our resolve. No matter what the case, as I argued in my last column, our decisions about what is "ethical" in a situation will always depend upon a delicate balance of relative judgements: What is in the best interests of the tutors, the center, the students, the administrators, and ourselves?

Next month: The event that spurred all this reflection.

Michael A. Pemberton
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Response to *Writing Center Ethics*

In the January 1993 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Michael Pemberton in his "Writing Center Ethics" column, touched on the precarious balance between personal involvement and professional distance which a tutor is constantly striving to maintain in his or her relationship with the student. However, another "balance," equally important and perhaps even more difficult to achieve, is that of remaining neutral when the student you are tutoring and that student's professor are almost viciously at odds with one another.

When Kirsten and I had our first appointment together, she had already handed in two papers for Mr. E's composition class. On the first she had received a D-, with the opportunity to revise it for a higher grade, which she had done. Pleased that she had made the effort, I looked down at the revised copy to find yet another D-, with a vague comment that it was not an improvement. At this point Kirsten burst into tears, and inquired angrily as to why she wasn't granted even a minor grade improvement ("even a D would have been encouraging!") when she had tried. I, having no answer for this, mumbled something about how each teacher has a different revision policy. After two quarters of tutor training, I knew better than to bad mouth or even disagree with a teacher's methods, let alone his grading system. She then showed me the grade on her second paper, an F, with a note at the bottom explaining that it was so different in style and substance from her first paper, he surmised it had been plagiarized. Kirsten took this to mean that Mr. E felt she was so "dumb" she was incapable of writing anything insightful or intelligent. I tried to revive her confidence in her writing ability, but inside I was disturbed by the blatantly unjust Mr. E, a man I had not met but knew to be in his first semester of teaching. As for Kirsten, she spent the remainder of that session in tears, ripping Mr. E and his unfair teaching practices to shreds.

Our second appointment consisted of more rage, anxiety, and tears from Kirsten—she had cited every source on her “plagiarized” paper, but still received an F since her own ideas made up very little of the paper’s content. At this point I went to see Mr. E. I was determined to find out, as professionally as possible, why he had been so harsh. After I introduced myself as Kirsten’s tutor, he became immediately defensive and said that Kirsten turned in every paper late, rarely came to class, and never bothered to follow his directions for each writing assignment. As I listened to the frustration and resentment in his voice, it was clear that he held as much animosity for her as she did for him. I left his office confused and exasperated that Kirsten had obviously not told me the whole story.

I spent the rest of the week contemplating how I would handle the remaining weeks of the quarter. It would have been easy to sympathize with Kirsten, since being a student myself I knew how discouraging it was to revise a paper and then be told my efforts were useless. Perhaps he was overly uncharitable in his comments and revision policy. Yet I was, in a sense, a teacher-in-training, and I could see that Kirsten was obviously unmotivated and had violated several of his rules. Mr. E may have been reacting to those violations. Furthermore, my efforts to aid them in reaching a sort of truce by having a teacher-student conference had failed—they had met together on several occasions without success. No one was budging.

I finally decided that I would concern myself only with what I was supposed to be at DePaul’s writing center for—writing and ways to make it better. For the remaining weeks the only relationships I allowed myself to become enveloped in were those of writer and audience, rhythm and word choice, style and content. I ignored snide remarks from Kirsten, and waited silently for Mr. E’s grumbling to subside when I went to obtain copies of his paper assignments.

At the end of the quarter Kirsten filed a formal complaint to the Dean of the University concerning Mr. E, and he failed her for never turning in her final paper. Their quarter together had been plagued by many factors, not the least of which was a lack of communication. Never once was I asked by either Kirsten or Mr. E what either of them could do to help this situation.

That was the hardest quarter I had since I began working in the writing center. If they learned nothing from it, I learned a great deal. I am now aware of how fragile the relationship between teacher and student is. As a tutor, I knew it was my job to maintain a kind of academic symmetry, externally always, and internally as best I could. I hope that this struggle will eventually help me prevent a scenario such as this if I ever become a teacher. If it does occur, at least I’ll know how it feels to be the tutor, struggling to keep her balance.

Claire George, Tutor
DePaul University
Chicago, IL

(cont. from page 5)

**WE CONTINUE TO MOVE TOWARD TRUE
WRITING-TO-LEARN IN ALL CLASSES.**

We believe that “writing across the curriculum” and “writing-to-learn” are two of the most misunderstood and misused concepts/terms in education. For far too many, “writing across the curriculum” has come to mean assigning traditional essay exams, research papers, and abstracts, and these are often added to other methods of evaluating content learning (and the results are most often disastrous for students and instructors). We do not disagree that such uses of writing have a legitimate place in education; however, our focus is on developing more meaningful “writing-to-learn” activities whose goal is to *improve and increase* student thinking skills and content learning, not just measure what has been learned. We have discovered that we begin by working with teachers in using traditional writing tasks, but the successes of writing-to-learn activities continue to increase the number of instructors who begin to incorporate these into their classes. Such efforts are often among our most frustrating work, but the long term gain of improved student skills (and less dependence on our center) makes our efforts worthwhile.

We are not sure how universal these occasionally not so self-evident truths may be for other writing centers, and as we continue our work and assessment, we will undoubtedly discover more truth which will shape our goals and efforts. However, as we tell our clients about our suggestions in the center, we offer these as options for others to consider.

James Upton
Burlington High School
Burlington, Iowa

Tutors' Column

I first remember meeting Steve when his elbow connected with my face on the basketball court last fall. Ironically, we have since become good friends both on and off the court. We respect each other for our abilities and talents, while considering each other equals. This is why I feel that the most uncomfortable situation I have experienced thus far in my college's writing center was the day that Steve showed up as one of my standing appointments. I also feel that of all the experiences I have had tutoring, this one turned out to be the most valuable for me.

I can vividly remember feeling both shocked and intimidated when I discovered Steve's name adjacent to my own on the weekly schedule. I even felt contempt for the people who pair up the tutors and tutees, even though there was no way they could have known of my relationship with this particular tutee. I had but five minutes before he was to enter through the "pearly gates" of the writing center, only to see that I was to be his "savior." The thought of working with Steve in an academic setting was so foreign to me that it caused me to shiver. He was sure to feel uncomfortable with a friend and equal tutoring him. After all, this would be the most intellectual activity we would have done together, that is, next to doing "beer funnels" on the weekends. I seriously considered getting someone else to work with Steve, but I couldn't help but think that I would regret not giving the situation a try. I would soon find out that this would be the wisest decision I have made as a writing tutor.

The session began with predictable smalltalk about how surprised we were to be in the positions we were in. After all, I did not even know that he had failed the writing test his freshman year. I quickly discovered that if our work together was going to be successful, I would have to be direct and serious with Steve from the outset. Because of our relationship, I would have to take more control in our sessions than I had with any other tutees before him. It would be too easy for us to talk about the party coming up that weekend when work got uncomfortable for us. I would have to keep total focus on his writing in every session we

were to spend together. Yes, I felt uncomfortable in this role; however, it turned out to be a highly effective way to get positive results.

"Let's take a look at your writing I have in this folder, Steve." These were the initial words I used to make the transition into a working environment, and also the words that symbolized a "point of no return" for that session. Steve's writing was very good, and I was happy to find that his failure on the test was definitely due to a bad day. Even though I was confident Steve had the ability to pass the test easily on a second attempt, I still dissected his writing to help him with any specific problems he might have had. After going over some specifics on the methods of taking the test itself, we worked together on several specific aspects of his writing. It was definitely one of the most successful tutoring sessions that I have conducted, and the sessions that followed with Steve were positive as well.

Tutoring friends in the writing center's environment can be a rewarding experience for both parties, if it is handled in a professional manner. I feel much more confident now when I constructively criticize and aid my tutees in their writing, since I have effectively helped Steve. Who knows? Maybe your friendship will even grow because of it. I can confidently say that ours did.

Steven Simpson, Peer Tutor
St. John Fisher College
Rochester, NY

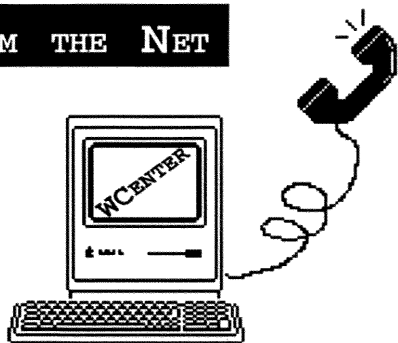
Call for Proposals

Midwest Writing Centers Association Conference

Oct. 1-2, 1993
St. Louis, MO

For a proposal form, contact Susan Sanders, Dept. of Humanities, MTU, 1400 Townsend Dr., Houghton, MI 49931 (906-487-2007). Proposal deadline: April 15, 1993.

VOICES FROM THE NET



---ERIC CRUMP

Putting out the Welcome Mat for Tutors

Electronic forums like WCenter* are friendly, collegial places where the gap in authority and voice between students and professionals is narrowed. This assertion is axiomatic among many people who make regular forays into the network world. Sounds Utopian (to some of us), but it is true, nevertheless. However, a recent discussion on the forum suggests that truth may not always justify assumptions.

Pam Eaglen asks whether peer tutors are welcome on WCenter. Several regular participants in the discussion, most of them writing center directors, say that "of course" peer tutors are welcome. But the fact that Pam had to ask, and the fact that directors had assumed the inclusion of tutors was self-evident indicates that openness is not necessarily invitation, even in an apparently inclusive environment. And it suggests a question that tutors and directors of any writing center, online or off, might ask themselves, especially if they view their writing center as a place where students and tutors and directors treat each other like colleagues: To what extent are vertical levels of authority intact and to what extent is authority really shared? Are tutors' voices welcome—and included—in the continuous process of running a writing center?

In the meandering stream of discussion on WCenter, explicit invitations are not often marked. The same lack might exist in face-to-face settings. The discussion below may serve as a starting point for making explicit an invitation we should not take for granted.

From: Pam Eaglen, Tue, 2 Feb 1993

After reading Eric Hobson's article, "Coming In Out of the Silence" in February's issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, I began to wonder about the discussions I have read on WCenter. I find them all very interesting, but as an undergraduate peer tutor in Ball State's Writing Center, I find that they are not very applicable to peer tutors. I have not, in fact, ever read any messages by peer tutors, and I am wondering if they are out there. Is Hobson's endorsement of WCenter just for faculty, or is it that peer tutors have no access to terminals that carry WCenter? Our Writing Center is fortunate enough to have such a computer so that all the peer tutors can read the exchanges transmitted on WCenter. Can peer tutors be included in the discussions? What can be done to encourage peer tutors to join the network?

From: John Edlund, Tue, 2 Feb 1993

Pam,
I don't think there are many peer tutors who have access to WCenter, but it is not because of any WCenter policy (at least not that I am aware of). For most administrators and faculty, the internet is a very new thing, and dollars are just becoming available to give faculty members access. This is backwards in a sense, because often graduate students and tutors are more interested in the possibilities.

In my center I plan to set up a terminal for this purpose. I have scrounged an old AT that will work, and I have ordered an ethernet card for it that will connect it to the campus network. I think access to lists like WCenter and MBU (Megabyte University, another Listserv list) is a very important resource for tutors of all kinds. It is true that we spend an awful lot of time talking about how to get money out of deans and what kind of computer equipment to buy. Sometimes we do talk about tutoring though!

From: Eric Hobson, Tue, 2 Feb 1993

Pam, et al.:
Glad to have you aboard. And, even more glad that you are willing to join the conversation. Keep it up.

In writing the *WLN* piece, I intended it to be fully accessible to all the WC community,

regardless of "status." To answer your question about who uses WCenter, however, I have to say access for students varies according to schools. At U Tennessee, where I was a student, all students had a mainframe account; at Southwest Missouri, students have to get a faculty sponsor who has to about sign over the keys to the house to get the student an account. I do know, for instance, that the WCenter at Valparaiso is on-line, with its staff listening in on the conversations and joining in when the mood hits them. We need more of your voices, so keep talking.

From: Cindy Johaneck, Wed, 3 Feb 1993

I understand the difficulty (and sometimes the financial impossibility) of having internet available to tutors. For directors who are on the network, though, how do you distribute info to tutors? Do you print messages out and pass them around? Post them on bulletin boards (the old fashioned kind)? Put them in a 3-ring binder? Do you ever spend time in staff meetings, etc. to discuss WCenter tidbits? I'm curious how we can make this network accessible in other ways—to the tutors who are really at the heart of most writing centers.

From: Paula Gillespie, Thu, 4 Feb 1993

How to get tutors involved: we have just signed on, and rather than subscribe under my own account, I opened a new account for the Writing Center. All our tutors will be able to use it, and students will be able to use it to send us messages. I'm planning to show the staff how to use WCenter at our next staff meeting. I think of WCenter as a great way to occupy some of those dead periods between paper assignments.

From Mickey Harris, Thu, 4 Feb 1993

Paula,
Reading and responding WCenter would be a great use of your tutors' time, and another possibility is to get them to think about writing Tutors' Columns for the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Some of the best ones we've gotten have been written partly as group exercises among tutors to write, collaborate, revise, collaborate again, etc.

Our undergrad tutors have been a bit reluctant to get involved with the world of e-mail, but an incentive might be that they could chat (maybe via WCenter?) with

tutors elsewhere. Think we can get something going?

From: Kim Jackson, Thu, 4 Feb 1993

Mickey,
Great idea. Maybe we should set up some days and times when they can have an electronic conversation when a number of tutors are "on-line" at the same time. Could be very productive.

From: Joel Nydahl, Thu, 4 Feb 1993

Mickey's comment that UG tutors seem reluctant to get "involved with the world of e-mail" is right on the money. In fact, I find that almost all undergraduates avoid using e-mail like the plague—even at a school like Babson where computer literacy is stressed. Why is that? When I say that I'll be posting things on the VAX, I get baleful stares. Hmmmm...

From: Lady Falls Brown, Thu, 4 Feb 1993

Hi, group.
I've been following the discussion concerning peer tutors participating on WCenter. Yes, of course they are welcome. When I asked Fred Kemp to set up WCenter for all of us, I had in mind MBU, the list he had created for computers and composition people. As those of you know who have participated in MBU, everyone is welcome, students, graduate students, professors, professionals, etc. The same applies here. Peer tutors are certainly welcome.

At Texas Tech University, we have had and will have again a computer networked to the VAX system and to the Macintosh computer classroom. During the down time, our tutors do read and some participate in the discussion. Some of you may have read messages from Amanda Corcoran and Tamra Mabe, among others.

Again, I am so pleased when I see that people interested in writing center theory and professional development utilize this forum. So, anyone involved in or interested in writing centers is certainly welcome to read and to respond.

Now, to get ready for class tomorrow. Bye.

From: Mickey Harris, Fri, 5 Feb 1993

Joel,
You and I seem to live in worlds where

undergrads have a similar aversion to e-mail.

We are planning to get online on our campus to offer some electronic tutoring (as I think I mentioned a few days ago), and I've been asking undergrads if a campus e-mail service would be useful to them (we envision something like them sending questions via e-mail), and while the engineering students say "of course...is there any other way to communicate?" the humanities students who admit that they have accounts can't remember when they've last used them. No, I don't understand the reluctance either because when I do meet students plugged into e-mail, they become almost lyrical about the worlds it opens up for them. I can't quite figure it all out. Even the students in computer labs where writing courses are taught and where everyone gets an introduction to e-mail don't seem too enthusiastic.

From: Joyce Kinkead, Fri, 5 Feb 1993

About e-mail: For UG students to become interested in e-mail it must be easily accessible and also purposeful. When those two criteria are met, then it becomes as seductive as their regular mailboxes. Humanities students may not be able to get past some machine phobia at first, but once they have the notion of letters, epistles, correspondence, then they become much warmer toward it.

Our tutors have access to VAX accounts but most of them tend to use the campus network instead, which they're familiar with through their writing courses which incorporate e-mail. We could certainly get some of them on-line though for a conversation, and once that is done, I suspect they'd log on fairly often.

** WCenter is an electronic discussion forum for students, writing assistants, and writing center directors. It was started in 1991 by Lady Falls Brown (YKFLB@ttacs), director of the writing center at Texas Tech University, and is managed by Fred Kemp (YKFOK@ttacs), director of composition at Texas Tech.*

Using Response Journals For Problem-Solving in the Writing Center

Communication among writing center personnel is essential; we are particularly adept at communicating ideas to the students and helping them communicate clearly to readers. But how effectively can writing center personnel communicate with each other, and how important is this communication to the successful operation of a writing center? These are questions I faced when, at the beginning of our fourth year of operation, I found myself supervising nine writing center personnel. At Chesapeake College, we call the students and faculty who work in the writing center "consultants" because we view our role not as teacher or tutor but rather as one with whom students may talk about writing. Our consultants work at different times and rarely overlap, so finding a common time when we could meet to discuss problems in the operation of the center was impossible. In addition, many student consultants were working for the first time and needed the help and support a seasoned consultant could offer. I thought about the series of exercises I did during a Maryland Writing Project Summer Institute using response journals; they were not only immensely useful and informative, but more importantly, they were professionally rewarding. I wondered if response journals could work as a means of problem-solving in our writing center.

It did not take us long to discover we could address a number of writing center problems and find some solutions by using our response journals. I supplied our consultants with various colored spiral notebooks, explaining how each of us would write in our own journals. I used my journal to model the kinds of communication we could expect; in their journals I asked questions, commented on a particularly good session I observed, or tried to assure them that they would become more comfortable with their abilities when they were more practiced. Before long I was reading comments in the journals from one consultant to another. As the consultants became more comfortable with both the writing center and the journals, they grew more comfortable with each other; soon they were writing freely in the journals, and we began identifying and solving problems.

Continuity

One problem our writing center faces is providing a sense of continuity for students who come to the center at various times and who must work with different consultants. We operate on a drop-in basis in order to provide students with writing help at the time they need it. We believe strongly that the center must be a drop-in service so we can help those students whose writing problems demand immediate attention as well as those students who come regularly. The response journals provided an opportunity for the consultants to "talk" to one another about students, particularly those who were having serious difficulties. All consultants understood that any discussion about students was to be held in strictest confidence. On October 1, Bill, an adjunct consultant, wrote in his journal that a student, NL, with whom he had worked that day, was having great difficulty writing complete sentences. In Bill's journal, I thanked him for bringing this student to our attention. On October 3, Laura, a student consultant, helped NL enter a CDP 101 paper on the computer, and since he had requested help only with the computer and not with the paper itself, she resisted the urge to mention the obvious and serious problems with his sentences. She did, however, comment in her journal:

He [NL] needs help but I feel unqualified to give him the help he obviously needs.

Another student consultant, Anna, responded in Laura's journal:

I worked with NL today and I'm not sure we understood each other at all. What are we supposed to do?

That same day, Cathy, an adjunct and seasoned consultant, commented in her journal:

Laura was so concerned [about NL] that she returned to the Center after class to discuss what to do. I assured her that she had done all she could, but that there will be times we can't give what the student really needs.

I suggested in Laura's journal that perhaps I needed to see NL so that I could assess his writing problems and find him more help; I then contacted his advisor and instructor to discuss the problems we were noticing. In my own journal, on October 3, I asked that all consultants read the entries in Bill's and Laura's journals and that the next time NL came to the Center to refer him to me:

There are students and problems that we, as writing center consultants, need

to be alert to; students come here for help often well before an instructor notices any problems. So if you work with someone who is having more difficulty than usual, mention it in your journal so we can all give that student special help. What no one wants is for students to be in a no-win situation. Don't be afraid to comment; a careful follow-up will be done that will not embarrass you or the student.

I met NL on October 4, and discovered that he was an ESL student with Spanish as his primary language. When I reported this in my journal, Julie, a student consultant, wrote: *Mrs. B., maybe I can help NL with his English. I have had four years of Spanish and it would be good practice for me to work with him.*

So Julie and NL began working together, and on November 14, Laura, a student consultant, wrote in her journal:

I just got done working with NL. What an improvement! The paper I read hardly needed any correction to make sense. I hope he does well in his CDP class.

My comment followed Laura's:

I hear from his instructor that he is doing OK in CDP 101, thanks in part to the papers he is writing with Julie's help. The news about NL's progress is great; no one knows where a chance remark or observation will lead. Through our journals we became aware of NL's problems and were able to help him improve his writing. Good work, team! Without our journal communication we might not have noticed and found the kind of help this student needed.

As a result of the dialogue in our response journals, we were able to coordinate our efforts and provide this student with badly needed help. While this is a significant example of the value of our journals, it is far from the only way the journals were helpful.

Student Awareness

In their journals, consultants discussed the problem of student awareness of the role and scope of the writing center service. For example, one consultant wrote:

I've heard random complaints from students that the writing center is not catching all their mistakes. How can we

make the students more aware of what we look for in papers [clarity], or that they need to be specific in their requests [such as check spelling, sentence structure, organization, etc.]? Maybe a handout?

I agreed that sometimes students' ability to tell us what they want is a problem:

We do ask students to identify their 'Reason for Visit' on the form they fill out when entering the center. If they are not specific or are unsure, we can ask: What would you like to work on today?

I also suggested that at the close of a session a consultant can continue:

You seem to have a better understanding about how to revise your paper for organization, but you should also be aware of the need to look for problems in spelling. I suggest that you tackle the organization problem first and then return with your revision so we can address the spelling problems.

An adjunct consultant commented:

Maybe we need to be more specific ourselves and ask what they want help with since we are not able to give a student's paper a 'quick fix.' Perhaps we could design a large poster based on the Do's and Don't's in our brochure.

As a consequence of these entries, two large posters were printed, and we have been pleased to see that students more often tell us what they need to work on now and seldom come to the center for a "quick fix." Through the journals we were able to identify this problem and find a solution.

Concerns And Techniques

Another serious problem facing our writing center personnel was their inability to share concerns and successful techniques for conducting sessions. We needed to be able to learn from one another, and the journals gave us this opportunity. For example, Anna, a student consultant, wrote:

I wonder if I'm guiding students in the right direction, if it's just me not knowing the subject or if it is an unclear paper. I'm afraid to make a mistake.

Laura, in turn, commented:

I feel that way too sometimes. I have begun to read papers aloud to students so that they recognize errors themselves when they hear what they wrote. Also, even if the paper is on a subject I don't

know, I should still should be able to understand what they write. If not, I ask them to explain what they mean and jot down what they say. Often that is what they need to add to the paper.

I saw this as an opportunity to share what worked for me, and commented:

Reading the paper aloud works best for me, too. This way the student and not the consultant is responsible for recognizing and correcting problems. It is often surprising what we miss when we read a paper we have written; hearing it read or reading it aloud gives us an entirely new perspective.

From this one exchange in our journals, all the consultants were alerted to a common concern and were able learn about a technique that two of us found helpful.

Morale

Working in a writing center can be a difficult experience, and the problem of low morale surfaces at times. Even seasoned consultants can become discouraged. At a time when spirits seemed to be particularly low in our center, and several consultants had expressed concern over their ability to work with student writers, Tunisa, the student who keeps our records and assists with the computers, wrote in her journal:

Consultants, don't be discouraged if you can't give someone the help that you would like to—it all depends on the person whether he'll accept your help and advice or not. I've worked around all of you and you do a good job giving them the help they need.

One of the consultants responded in Tunisa's journal:

Your entry is encouraging. It is easy to let one consultation get you down. Good pep talk, especially from a different point of view. You have given us a perspective we might otherwise not have. Thanks.

Our journal entries enabled us to give each other the encouragement and support so necessary to raise our spirits and to continue our work with confidence.

Self-Doubt

Even with the support we have from each other, however, we sometimes face the problem of self-doubt, of not knowing whether or not we are effective in the help we give a

student. After working with a student who was particularly difficult to understand, Laura wrote in her journal:

Worked with MM today. Her writing was much more clear than her speech and I had trouble understanding what she was saying. I helped her check her spelling and word usage, but am afraid I did too much. I wrote Dr. H a note asking for suggestions on how to help her.

The following day, after reading Laura's entry and talking with Dr. H, I wrote in Laura's journal:

Dr. H came by to let you know about your work with MM, and to tell you that what you did here was exactly the right thing, that your assessment of her work was right on target. Dr. H also wanted you to know that this student really listens when she is being helped so that she does learn what you teach. In closing, Dr. H said you did a great job. Congratulations!

Laura responded:

I found out I did the right things with MM. That made me feel much better.

As consultants we could share and understand Laura's concern, and learn that feedback can be a rewarding experience. We delighted in Laura's success and reinforced confidence.

Working Through Thinking

Sometimes when we are struggling with a difficult problem, we need to write in order to "see what we are thinking" (writing-to-learn), and our journals afforded us this opportunity. The other consultants reading this type of journal entry benefit from the insight recorded. An entry in Cathy's journal read:

How can I remain calm working with J? She needs someone to listen to her and I am glad to when it's about her writing. However, it is difficult to keep her on track. This may be because when I had her in ENG 101 I took lots of time with her and encouraged her. WAIT—I just had a flash. It was a vision of how J used to be. She had been critically hurt in a car accident, and she was just coming out of the injuries and trauma when she took ENG 101. In comparison [to then] she is much stronger and able to think more clearly now. I might not have remembered that if I hadn't started to write about this problem.

I replied in her journal:

This is a good example of writing-to-learn. It is like seeing in writing what we are thinking. I, too, have worked with J but never knew why she has such trouble with concentration; I appreciate the information. As consultants we must be alert for students who get off the track, and must work to kindly but firmly return them to the topic of their writing.

Cathy's entry was a good model of writing-to-learn for us to follow when we were struggling with a problem and need to think on paper.

Isolation

Our journals were perhaps most valuable in solving the problem of little or no interaction between consultants in the writing center. The journals helped us to solidify the comraderie needed among fellow consultants for a pleasant and smoothly operating writing center. In a December journal entry, Tunisa suggested we have a Christmas party so as to meet each other and to share some fun; there followed many journal entries devoted to picking the date, setting the time, and planning the refreshments. We had a wonderful time putting faces with the people we knew only through our journals.

Atmosphere

As a bonus, the journals helped us to dispel a potential problem, an atmosphere of disunity in the writing center. They gave us, the consultants, a way to become friends and to share our thoughts about working in a writing center, and because we were colleagues, the students who came for writing assistance could not help but sense the unity and the friendly, comfortable atmosphere in the writing center; therefore, students felt comfortable sharing their writing problems with us. Several consultants, in their final entries for the semester, commented on their feeling about working in the center and using response journals. Anna wrote:

Working in the writing center has been the best thing that has happened to me this term. I hope what I have learned from all of you will help in the up-coming years in college. I can see that working with students has brought out my strong and weak points. I hope I have been of help to them; they (and you) have helped me.

Cathy wrote:

These journals are great. I love reading them and seeing the comments from others. I think it is a great communication link for us and really strengthens the writing center.

And Laura, who was graduating and transferring to a four-year school in January, wrote:

My last day in the writing center. I will truly miss this place next semester. There have been a few tough spots but this has been a very positive experience for me. I have learned some of the things I had forgotten, and learned plenty of new information. Thank you for the opportunity to work here, to learn, and to make new friends.

Although we began the semester as strangers, we ended it as trusted friends and colleagues.

The benefits of using response journals were many; we found solutions to some universal writing center problems. We were able to provide continuity for both students and consultants, to heighten student awareness of the role and scope of the center, to share our concerns and techniques with other consultants, to boost low morale, to lessen self-doubt,

to work through thinking by writing, and to eliminate feelings of isolation among consultants. We also dispelled a potential problem of disunity in the atmosphere of the writing center. Journals have helped us to communicate with each other, and to create a dialogue in which we can find solutions to problems as they arise.

Mary Pat Birdsall
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