The WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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

Volume 17, Number 9 May, 1993

....from the editor....

The newsletter is, I hope, a vehicle for us to exchange ideas, and as you've noted, it's also a tool for staff training and development. In this month's issue, you might want to consider using Michael Pemberton's column as a focus for such discussion.

For the last few months in Michael Pemberton's "Writing Center Ethics," there have been references to an event that stayed in the background as he asked us to consider a number of ethical issues. This month he gives an account of that event— a request by a faculty member for the names of teaching assistants under this faculty member's supervision whose writing instruction efforts have been minimal. (As tutors in writing labs, we see and know a lot about the quality of what's going on in the classrooms down the hall.) What did Michael Pemberton do? First, he turned to his staff to hear their suggestions, and next month, we'll learn what was said. What might your staff say? If you use some time this month to discuss what your answers would be, you can compare them with the responses of the U. of Illinois tutors. Tune in next month....

•Muriel Harris, editor

....inside....

Teacher Expectations: A Powerful Third Force in Tutoring Sessions

Writing in *College English*, Lad Tobin remarks on the role that teachers play in students' writing processes. As Tobin points out, "From a student's perspective a writing teacher *is* an authority figure, even—or especially—in process classrooms" (339). While Tobin's remarks are directed toward defining and redefining a writing teacher's role in the classroom, they also have significance for those of us in writing centers. Quite often, we see tutoring as the collaboration between two people, the tutor and the tutee (Behm 6). By so doing, we may be overlooking a powerful *third* force—the tutee's classroom teacher (albeit a writing instructor or a teacher from another discipline) and that teacher's expectations of student writing. At least some professors, in their teaching and/or in their grading, emphasize certain rhetorical elements (e.g., a clear thesis, a logical organization of ideas, a creative sentence style) more than others. These emphases

affect significantly how students often seek to improve their writing *because* they want to please their teachers. Therefore, teacher expectations should be considered when tutoring students.

Before explaining further, I would like to anticipate one possible objection to the notion that a key purpose of a writing center is to help student writers fulfill their teachers' expectations. As a colleague and former writing center director who critiqued an earlier draft of this paper wrote, "Are you taking the political position that personnel *should* focus only on teachers' idiosyncrasies in writing? You might be opening up 'a can of worms,' perhaps one which should be opened." No, I am not taking the position that the sole purpose for tutoring is catering to teachers' emphases. Indeed, like many of you, I believe that writing centers serve the broader purpose of educating students and faculty about writing. Rather, I am taking the practical position that teachers' expectations are a reality student writers confront daily. Thus, as one aspect of tutoring, we should help students improve those rhetorical elements of their writing which their professors most value. But there are two obstacles that may make it difficult for us to help students fulfill their teachers' expectations. Some practical methods we can use to identify teachers' emphases are offered here to solve this.

One obstacle we often encounter is trying to identify the rhetorical elements a teacher values most in his/her students' writing. Quite often, this difficulty arises because the rhetorical elements teachers *say* they value often differ significantly from those elements these teachers *actually* emphasize when teaching and/or reward when grading their students' papers. Some teachers place a higher value on certain rhetorical elements in their students' writing. When I teach and grade writing, for instance, I stress a logical organization of ideas, sometimes to the near exclusion of certain other rhetorical elements such as sentence style. Based on informal conversations with faculty and on my work in our Writing Center, I also know that other teachers have their own emphases. For example, I am familiar with at least two writing instructors who, unlike myself, particularly stress stylistics. The professor in Communications includes a statement in her syllabus that reveals clearly her emphasis—students who make more than four mechanical and/or spelling errors in their papers will receive a "C" or below on that paper. Another professor in management insists his students include graphic aids to readability (e.g., bullets, headings and subheadings) in their written business reports and lowers significantly the grade of any student who does not.

Of course, teachers emphasize certain rhetorical elements more than others for a variety of reasons, some of them quite understandable. For some professors, these priorities may reflect their research interests. Certainly, my concern that students produce well-organized prose arises from my dissertation study in which I investigated the effects of text summary vs. sentence outline instruction on student writers' essay structuring abilities. One of the writing professors emphasizes stylistics because she was influenced by her studies with Joseph Williams at the University of Chicago. For other faculty, their priorities reflect previous experiences or the demands of their discipline. For example, the Communications professor implemented her rule because she had observed, over the past several semesters, an increasing number of spelling and grammar errors in her students' research papers. The management professor stresses the use of visuals in his students' business reports because, as a retired corporate executive, he knows that busy professionals have precious little time to read reports. Preparing his students to write in management

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

positions, he believes, means teaching them that graphic aids to readability such as bullets and headings are important.

Whatever the reason for a particular teacher's emphases, this dichotomy between what teachers say they value and what they actually teach and/or reward in their students' writing is problematic for us. This dichotomy may make it difficult to identify the elements each professor values most in his/her students' writing; in turn, this difficulty may undercut a tutor's ability to help a given teacher's students improve these elements in their writing.

In addition, a second obstacle—one over which we have perhaps more control due to its internal nature—may be blocking our ability to help student writers fulfill their teachers' expectations. This obstacle is the tutor's conscious decision to focus on areas other than those stressed by the tutee's professor. In many cases, this decision is made for a very good reason. That is, as purveyors of effective writing, we may believe that certain higher order skills such as content and structure take precedence over lower order skills like sentence style and mechanics, depending, of course, on where a student writer is in the composing process. As we tutor students, we may not only espouse this belief, as some teachers do; we also may attempt to practice it.

In the best of all possible worlds, this prioritizing appears to be admirable since it gives the students we tutor the opportunity to develop the full range of rhetorical elements that define effective writing—including those their professors emphasize. Practically speaking, however, because tutors are often constrained by time, they rarely have the opportunity to help students develop all of these elements in their writing. Instead, we must make choices about what rhetorical elements to focus on when tutoring each student.

When a tutor knows but decides to overlook a teacher's emphases in favor of elements the tutor deems more important, the writing center's relationship with faculty and students may suffer. Feeling that tutors are insensitive to faculty expectations, teachers may stop sending their students to the writing center. Likewise, student writers who are not tutored in those areas their professors value most may quit coming to the writing center for assistance, thus severing any future opportunity tutors may have to help these students develop their rhetorical skills in areas beyond those a teacher emphasizes. In addition, the tutor's decision to ignore a professor's emphases may affect adversely the tutor-tutee relationship, as I will illustrate with an incident that occurred recently in our Writing Center.

A young man came to the Center for assistance with an essay he was writing for English Composition 101. As is our custom, the tutor first asked the young man what type of help he desired. The young man indicated he needed assistance with sentence style. However, our tutors are schooled that writing is a process and that one examines content and organization for needed revisions before moving on to areas such as stylistics and mechanics. Perceiving serious lapses in logic and organization in the young man's draft, the tutor suggested they work to revise the essay structure. She then began to work through the draft with the young man, trying to help him recognize and correct errors in logic and organization. As the tutoring session progressed, the young man became increasingly belligerent. Clearly, he was there to work on improving the style of his sentences—period! A creative sentence style, he advocated, was what his writing professor valued most (as I later discovered, the student was right!). Although his professor also may have expected organized essays, what was crucial was the student's perception of his teacher's evaluation criteria. Even more critical was the tutor's failure to recognize that the teacher's expectations—or the student's perception of these expectations—were a force at work in this tutoring session.

To tutor students like the one I've described, tutors should be trained to recognize that teachers are a powerful third force in tutoring sessions. The rhetorical elements a teacher emphasizes and rewards affect significantly how that professor's students approach their writing assignments. Teachers' emphases, and students' perceptions thereof, are a force to be acknowledged and appreciated in writing centers. If we accept teachers as a powerful third force in tutoring sessions, then we need practical methods to identify those rhetorical elements each professor most values in students' writing. Two methods are offered here.

First, questioning techniques, particularly when used at the beginning of a tutorial, serve at least three purposes. They show students

that tutors understand that teachers' emphases influence how students think and write. In addition, these questions help tutors discover if a tutee believes his/her professor prizes certain rhetorical elements above others. Finally, questions can help the tutor identify what those rhetorical elements are, and the tutor can then focus on these elements. (Of course, where time allows, tutors also can—and should—focus on additional rhetorical elements which need revising.) Sample questions include the following: What rhetorical elements/ writing qualities does professor X emphasize most frequently in lectures and discussions? What are the professor's grading criteria for writing assignments? Do some aspects of writing count more than others? On papers you have written previously for professor X, in what areas has the professor suggested your writing needs improvement?

Of course, the danger in relying solely on tutees' perceptions is that some students may misinterpret their teachers' expectations. Therefore, a second approach also should be used. To determine what rhetorical elements each teacher most values in his/her students' writing, we should solicit feedback from professors. For example, at the beginning of each semester, I send a memo to all faculty. In this memo, I request that professors send a copy of each writing assignment to our center. I encourage faculty to include specific instructions for each assignment (e.g., preferred topics, length, format, documentation style) as well as their objectives and grading criteria. In the past year, I have modified this memo. Because I have found some writing assignments to be somewhat vague in defining teacher emphases, I also now ask faculty to attach a copy of a "model" assignment. This model often tells us a good deal about what faculty value most in their students' writing. For example, one accounting professor assigns summaries of business journal articles. Although his instructions are one page or less, the "model" or sample summary he attaches illustrates clearly his expectations. These models have become particularly important for our tutors since the Writing-Across-the-Disciplines program began on our campus. In an attempt to fulfill this program's goals, many professors assign summaries. As one might imagine, what professors expect to see in their students' summaries varies widely, often reflecting the professor's discipline. For example, the biology professor's sample summary is characterized by the straightforward reporting of an experiment's results and research methods, elements scientists value and therefore elements this teacher expects to see emphasized in his students' summaries. Conversely, the philosophy professor's model summary includes less reporting of information and more critical evaluation of an article's main ideas and its logic.

In addition to requesting a copy of each professor's writing assignments and models, we should ask faculty to send a copy of their course syllabi to the center. Studying information listed on a syllabus such as required texts, objectives, and assignments may enable us to detect those rhetorical elements a professor most values in his/her students' writing. For example, I discovered that the Communications professor grades heavily on grammar and spelling by reading her syllabi.

We also can learn much by studying the comments professors write on their students' papers (assuming, of course, that these comments are, as Hoye and Lyons suggest, comprehensible) (3). By examining these comments, tutors not only can identify areas in which a particular student needs assistance, but they also can determine a teacher's emphases—especially when that teacher stresses the same rhetorical elements on several papers.

Finally, we can identify elements professors prize most through outreach activities. I have learned much through informal discussion with faculty. For example, I initially discovered in an informal chat over coffee with the young man's writing instructor that he most prized a creative writing style. Similarly, based on a conversation with the accounting professor during a faculty development workshop, I learned that he expects his students to follow a particular format when writing summaries of business journal articles. In addition to these informal means, we can identify professors' emphases when we are invited to their classrooms. We also can improve our communications with faculty (as well as identify their expectations and educate them about writing) by setting up personal meetings, particularly with professors who assign writing regularly (Walker 11). Of course, we must listen carefully, comparing the rhetorical elements a professor says he/she values most with those we have learned via other means (e.g., written comments on student papers, course syllabi

and assignments) he/she is teaching and rewarding in student writing.

My purpose has not been to suggest that we abandon the high road. Clearly, our ideal of helping students develop the full range of rhetorical elements that constitute effective writing across the disciplines is important. Nor am I suggesting that we tutor students only in areas professors deem important. Such a view, in my opinion, would limit severely the writing center's role of educating students and faculty. Indeed, such a view might lead us into the same trap so many public school teachers now find themselves—that is, "teaching to the test" rather than helping students become competent writers.

What I am advocating is that we acknowledge that teachers and their expectations are a powerful force in how students approach writing. Failing to recognize this force, we may close the door to further communication with a student—as unfortunately occurred with the young man in our writing center who insisted he needed help with stylistics. To this day, he will not work with the tutor who tried to help him organize his composition. In addition, we may lose the faculty support so critical to our survival. Appreciating the power of teachers' expectations enables writing centers to open the door to further communication with tutees and to provide student writers the assistance they need. Training tutors to listen to students' perceptions about their teachers' emphases and soliciting feedback from professors to determine factually these emphases are important first steps.

Belinda Wood Droll
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Decatur, IL

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Fourth Annual Meeting of the South Carolina Writing Center Association

The South Carolina Writing Center Association (SCWCA) held its fourth annual meeting in Spartanburg, South Carolina, on January 29, 1993. Representing twenty-one schools from across the state, approximately eighty writing center directors and peer tutors came together at Converse College for the meeting's program on "Weaving the Writing Center into the Fabric of Our Schools." Picking up on this theme in her keynote address, Dixie Goswami (Clemson University) stressed that writing labs have evolved into centers for research. In effect, they have become "natural laboratories for studying language and learning." The result, according to Goswami, is that writing centers can change the dynamics of an entire campus.

Besides the keynote address, lab directors and peer tutors attended informal sessions which stressed discussion and questions from the audience. Some sessions covered issues vital to all writing labs: "Launching a Writing Center" and "Publicizing the Writing Center through Newsletters." Other sessions focused on special applications of writing centers, such as a writing center's role in a technical college ("Tech Prep and Challenges for Tech Schools");

(cont. on page 7)

Writing Center Ethics

Over the last couple of columns (for those of you still with me), I've been laying some groundwork for the discussion of a troubling incident that occurred at my campus writing center. So far, I've talked about our deceptive practices in conferences, the ethical compromises we regularly make as we meet with students, and the influence that administrators can exert over our policies and operations. All the while, I've been dangling the proverbial carrot before your noses, tantalizing you with the promise that I would, before long, reveal the details of the incident that launched me on all this preliminary discussion.

<drum roll>

Well, the time has finally arrived.

<cymbal crash>

What I plan to do in this column is relate what happened, as it happened, and outline what I see as the critical aspects of the ethical dilemma I and my tutors found ourselves in. Next month I'll explain what I did and why.

Tattletales or Public Servants?

It started innocuously enough. At the University of Illinois, as in most colleges and universities across the country, we have a number of general education courses that nearly every first-year student takes at one time or another—freshman composition, speech communication, western civ, economics 101, intro to literature, political science 101—virtually all of which are taught by teaching assistants. In the writing center, we see scads of these first-year students every semester, all struggling with the writing assignments each of these classes requires. Some of these classes use the same assignments for every section every year, so the tutors become quite familiar with them and, if the truth be told, sometimes quite sick of them. Other classes allow TA's a greater latitude in the assignments they can give to their students, so tutors in the center also see a wide variety of writing tasks from TA's leading different discussion sections in the same course.

On the private e-mail list set up for workshop tutors to discuss writing center conferences, issues, and policies, one of the tutors wondered if other people had noticed a sudden jump in the number of "bad" assignments coming from one of these classes. Yes, agreed several, they too had noticed a significantly larger number of poor writing assignments from this class, and they went on to recount stories they had heard from students about TA's who returned papers unmarked except for a letter grade and one-sentence writing assignments with only the vaguest directions and guidelines for completion.

When I saw these messages come in, I felt the need to share them with the people in charge of the course that was being discussed. I didn't wish to involve or accuse anyone personally, but I felt that it was important that the people who oversaw and trained the course TA's know what seemed to be going on from our perspective in the writing center. I stripped the e-mail messages of all references to specific tutors (the course TA's were never mentioned by name), attached a note of my own (offering to visit a TA meeting with some of my tutors if it would help), and sent it off. I told my tutors that I was passing along some of their messages to the course directors and would let them know what, if anything, developed.

Within a day, I had gotten a response from all three professors to whom I had forwarded the message. All were appalled to hear what some of the TA's were doing, and they were all the more indignant because they had spent so much time in TA training sessions talking about the importance of constructing good writing assignments and commenting carefully on student papers. None expressed any particular interest in having me or my tutors visit TA meetings, preferring to handle the matter

themselves. That was fine with me; I was available if they needed any assistance.

One professor's response, however, went somewhat further. He bluntly asked me to "put my mouth where my money was" and tell him who these offending TA's were. "Are you ready to name names?" he asked. In his view, these TA's were quite possibly derelict in their duty, and he wanted to know whose hand deserved slapping or, perhaps, whose contract he shouldn't bother to renew.

This request for information about specific TA's, coupled with the underlying message that some sort of disciplinary action might be involved, is the "incident" that I've been referring to over the past few months, the one that posed an ethical dilemma. Was this request for information a fair one? For most of us who work in writing centers, our gut reaction might be to say "No! It's not fair! It's not our job to 'rat' on wayward teaching assistants!" But I think the situation calls for more than just a gut reaction. For one thing, we have to think about the question of "fairness." Fair to whom? Is it fair for the students of these possibly "derelict" TA's to struggle with vague, ambiguous assignments and no instructional support semester after semester after semester? Is it fair to the university as a whole to employ teaching assistants who are not doing their job? Is it fair to the teaching assistants who ARE doing their jobs well that some of their peers are receiving the same pay for less than adequate work?

Reporting to administrators, as I discussed in my last column, is a part of our job. If we don't do it the way we're expected to, WE could be denied tenure or disciplined or transferred. The question is, is "naming names" the kind of reporting we can be "expected to" do as a part of our job? Does it make a difference who is doing the asking or why they're doing so? Should it make a difference? Does it make sense to have a "hard line" policy about this practice, yea or nay, or is it best to remain "fuzzy," dealing with each situation as it comes? We make ethical compromises of one sort or another every day in the writing center, as I've argued before; how much of a compromise should we make here?

To help me answer these questions, I turned—as I often do—to my tutors. I had a fairly clear sense of where I stood on the issue, but I wanted to hear from the people who would have to deal with the fallout of my decision, whichever way it fell. In my next column, I'll tell you what they had to say.

Michael Pemberton
University of Illinois-Urbana

South Carolina Writing Center Assoc.

(cont. from page 5)

another session discussed "Teaching Writing and Desktop Publishing in the Writing Center," while a third showed how to reach beyond the writing lab by "Connecting with the Community and with Corporations." And, of course, sessions focused on the important concern of justifying writing centers to the administration: "Using Statistics to Build a Case for Your Writing Center" and "Certifying a Writing Lab: Advantages and Disadvantages."

Of special interest was a separate session for the peer consultants—"Conflicts and Resolutions for Peer Consulting." Peer tutors from two South Carolina schools chaired this session. A second unusual feature of this year's meeting was the ever-popular panel "What Works for Me," where six writing lab directors explained their most successful techniques for developing, publicizing, and directing a lab. In particular, the directors offered practical suggestions for studying the effect of collaborative writing, using computers to lure students into a lab, maintaining the right attitude toward each client, collecting professors' pet peeves about writing, enhancing the performance of tutors, and seeking help from faculty when selecting software for a lab.

SCWCA will meet next year in Columbia, S.C., under the guidance of the 1994 President Ghussan Greene (SC State University). For further information on the 1994 meeting, contact Glenn James, Conference Director, Midlands Technical College, Columbia, SC 29208.

Bonnie Devet
College of Charleston
Charleston, SC

MAWCA Conference Proceedings Available

Some copies of the 1993 *Proceedings of the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association Conference* are still available. If you would like a copy, please send a check for $8, payable to MAWCA, to Dr. Patricia Dyer, Writing Center, Widener University, One University Place, Chester, PA 19013.

Extended Call for Program Proposals

10th Annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing

Nov. 5-7, 1993
Grand Rapids, Michigan

The proposal deadline has been extended to June 15. Proposals may be submitted by mail, FAX, or e-mail. Proposals by peer tutors especially welcome. Contact Foote/Mayberry, Dept. of English, Lake Superior Hall, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI 49401-9403. Phone: 616-895-3479 or 616-895-3186; FAX: 616-895-3016; e-mail (Internet): footew@gvsu.edu.

Midwest Writing Centers Association Conference

October 1-2, 1993
St. Louis, MO

"Revising the Word, Revising the World: Writing Centers Effecting Change"

Keynote speaker: Lil Brannon

For information, contact Susan Sanders, Dept. of Humanities, Michigan Technological University, 1400 Townsend Drive, Houghton, MI 49931 (906-487-2007)

Call for Proposals

Southeastern Writing Center Association

Oct. 21-23, 1993

"Authorial Odysseys: Steering Writers into the 21st Century"

Featured speaker: Jacqueline Jones Royster

Contact Brenda Thomas, LaGrange College, 601 Broad St., LaGrange, GA 30241. Deadline for proposals: June 1.

Calendar for Writing Center Associations (WCAs)

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

October 21-23: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Atlanta, GA
Contact; Brenda Thomas, LaGrange College, 601 Broad St., LaGrange, GA 30241

Tutors' Column

Does a Comma Splice Have Horns?

When I first stopped into The Writing Center, I felt like a novice matador stepping into the bull-ring for the very first time. Who was I to be entering this sacred arena of tutoring? I did not believe that meeting prerequisites for the Peer Tutoring class qualified me as a writing tutor. I felt sure that my inexperience and self-doubt would serve as a red flag for my tutees, and that they, in turn would come rushing at me with their writing problems, only to disembowel my so-called qualifications. The question was, would my instincts pull me through, or would the sudden charge of my tutee cause me to be paralyzed with fear, standing rooted in my cubicle while waiting to be run through with the rapier-sharp point of a comma splice?

In reality, my tutoring experiences have not been quite that dramatic. I have, however, faced some very challenging situations. One of my tutees is a non-traditional student who has failed the Test of Competency in Writing three times. I inherited this student along with a thick folder cataloguing his history of a poor attitude toward tutoring and his tendency to skip appointments. Another tutee was generally apathetic about being tutored as well as about completing assignments. A third already had what he considered to be a negative experience in The Writing Center and was reluctant to have a peer read his writing. Each of these students seemed to be the one who would bring about my ultimate defeat.

Actually, these three students—along with a host of one-time-appointment students—have been victories for me; some were small and some were big. Every time the non-traditional student arrives for his session, it is an accomplishment. Every smile that appears upon completion of a revision is another one. There are big victories, such as the time the tutee who was reluctant to have a peer read his work brought in a paper to edit. There are also small victories, such as having a tutee recognize a split infinitive on his own. With each of these accomplishments, I feel I have achieved something as a tutor, even if it is something as simple as getting a tutee to come in for the next session. An event as basic as recognizing a sentence fragment becomes a result of efforts to help the student become a better writer.

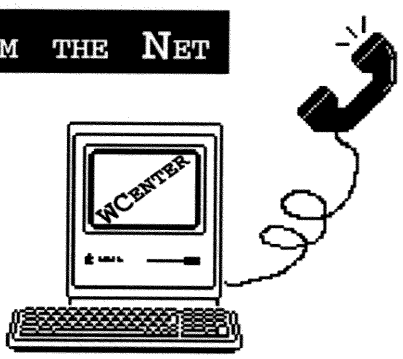
Perhaps this statement seems to be a bit extreme. I am no Svengali; my tutoring is geared toward making the student a good, independent writer. I try to let the student control the sessions, rather than control them myself. And although there have been many moments of gratification, there have also been many moments of frustration, such as the tutee who seemed to forget everything we had worked on during the session by the end of the half hour, the tutee who attempted to rewrite an essay by "changing a word here and there," and the student who finally gave up on our sessions altogether.

What I have learned is that tutoring is an experience in which the tutor constantly is learning; it is not only the tutee who learns from the sessions. In addition, much like the matador in the bull-ring, the tutor can never learn a formula that can be used in every session with every tutee, because there is no such formula. Rather, you must learn to be able to adapt to each new tutee as the matador adapts to each new opponent. Each situation is unique and must be handled in its own way. Some tutoring methods may not work with a student, even though they were useful in a previous session. Or, a tutee may have a certain way of writing that you find helpful in your own writing. (There have been times when I have questioned just who was tutoring whom!)

This constant interaction between tutor and tutee is what is important in becoming a good tutor. By seeing each accomplishment as the attainment of a goal and each frustrating experience as a minor setback, tutoring can be a positive learning experience for both tutor and tutee. You may be learning more than you think!

Cynthia Aleo
Peer Tutor
St. John Fisher College
Rochester, NY

VOICES FROM THE NET



---ERIC CRUMP

Feeling Prepared to Help Learning Disabled Writers

Learning disabled students are a mystery to many of us. We don't understand how they learn, and we aren't sure how we can help them with their writing. The subject, therefore, is one that surfaces frequently in our literature and in our network discussions. Below is a slice from a recent exchange on WCenter. It includes some questions from Jan Gerzema and the responses that followed from Amanda Inskip Corcoran and Cindy Johanek.

From: Jan Gerzema, Tue, 23 Feb 1993

I am rather new and perhaps WCenter has already discussed this, but I am interested in how other schools and writing centers handle the learning disabled (or substitute the most current term) student.

Several questions come to mind:

- How do you know who they are? Does Student Services inform you or does the student tell you or are you left to guess?
- What do you do if you suspect a student is LD?
- What extra services does the writing center provide for LD students?
- How do you train tutors/consultants to recognize and work with LD students?
- Are you satisfied that your school is doing enough for these students? What else would you like?
- Do you agree with me that many of the students we see with serious writing problems might be undiagnosed LD students?
- What kinds of accommodations do instructors make for LD students?
- How does the computer fit into dealing with LD students?
- What kind of success do you have in getting these students through classes that have heavy writing requirements?

Hope this is enough to get some response (and perhaps some ammunition when I push for looking more closely at our system here).

From: Amanda Inskip Corcoran, Wed, 24 Feb 1993

Jan,
WCenter quite recently (it seems) had a discussion about consulting with students with learning disabilities in the wc. Did anyone archive those? I remember there was a relatively recent article in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* about this issue too. To answer your questions briefly:

a) Our students...are responsible for informing instructors of their reading and writing difficulties themselves. Since some students find this diagnosis somewhat difficult to accept, some are quite reticent about telling you. Others seem to have no problem. I don't normally ask students I consult with—but I can normally tell who is most probably LD, and eventually they'll realize it's more helpful to them to inform you than to have you guess the most effective ways to help them.

b) What do I do if I suspect a student is LD? I don't tell them that I think they're LD. I'm just patient with my advice and let them lead the way in their writing. My reluctance to tell students that they might be LD is because this is such a delicate subject.

Some students and their parents get so upset when you hint at such a diagnosis that the consultation ends up in a phone call from the parents/dean. (THIS DIDN'T HAPPEN TO ME!! It's wc lore here at Texas Tech University!) I'm always at an ethical quandary there. I might ask (if I were feeling brave and felt that the student wouldn't fly off the handle) if the student had ever been tested for LD.

c) TTU offers some extra services for students with LD. Extra time in tests, readers, a reading machine at the library, tutors, and some sympathetic instructors (some still don't *believe* in LD). But all these services are only available to students who have been officially diagnosed as LD by TTU's Disabled Student Services.

d) Are we doing enough for students with LD? In our wc, we offer them patience and advice. We're on-line with the Mac classroom—there's always more that can be done—but I think we're doing OK right now.

e) Do I agree that there are many undiagnosed writers with LD? You bet. The question for writing instructors shouldn't be, "Do I have any students with LD?" but "Which students do I have who are LD?" Big hints about student writers with LD are the obvious writing and spelling problems (which don't seem to be the everyday writing weaknesses dealt with in the wc). Other hints concerning LD include a somewhat cyclical discussion in talking about the direction of the paper. Some of the students with LD that I have helped seem to take three steps backward in taking four steps forward in discussing the direction of their paper. Again, every student is different, so it's hard to generalize.

f) Computers and LD—INVALUABLE. This is my dissertation topic, so I can ramble on for hours about the benefits. Besides the "usual" computer benefits (spellcheck, neat presentation of normally scrappy LD writing, ease of manipulation of text, etc.), computers offer student writers with LD a chance to easily write and write and write. And we haven't even talked yet about the community on the computers (not too relevant to wc issues I don't think).

Anyway—I'll try to find that *WLN* citation for you if someone doesn't do that before me.

P.S. I taught three semesters of first year English to classes composed solely of LD students—hence my purported familiarity with their situation.

From: Cindy Johanek, Wed, 24 Feb 1993

Jan:
Amanda's responses could have come from Ball State, it seems. Here, too, students are responsible for informing their instructors/tutors that they are LD, but more often than not, the students...are unable to tell me exactly what they need, what they've been "diagnosed" as, beyond "I have trouble with reading and writing." I know that diagnosis often results in a more specific description, as other students are able to tell me about problems with attention, encoding certain kinds of information (not just all reading, etc.).

This summer, I hope to attend a week-long workshop at Landmark College—all about teaching writing to LD/dyslexic students. I've worked with several students here and as an undergrad at St. Cloud State (Judy? Where are you?), but I have never had any "formal" training. Therefore, I don't feel comfortable "training" other tutors here. Maybe next year (if I get my job back!).

P.S. I have kept all of the previous WCenter discussions about LD. It would take me time to dig them up, but I'd be happy to. Let me know.

From: Amanda Inskip Corcoran, Wed, 24 Feb 1993

Jan—here's that citation for that article I was talking about. I believe it's a column feature with the *Writing Lab Newsletter*:

Gills, Paula. "The Troubleshooter." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 14.3 (1989): 12-13.

The article provides a short but useful bibliography of LD related publications as well as discussion of attitudes, characteristics, and background. Interesting article.

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

Writing Lab Newsletter Back Issues— Half-Price Sale (last call)

Complete volumes of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* are on half-price sale, at $10/vol., until May 31, 1993. After May 31, the price returns to the regular $20/volume of whatever we have left. (We won't be re-stocking as we're trying to clear out some badly needed storage space in our Writing Lab and hope you have room instead to provide a home for some of these back issues.) For sale are vol. 2 (1977-78) through vol. 16 (1991-92). As usual, to save costs, we have no billing procedures and can't respond to purchase orders, so **PREPAYMENT IS REQUIRED.** Send checks, made payable to Purdue U., to the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Dept. of English, 1356 Heavilon Hall, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356.

Awards for Writers Reward Writing Centers

Last year, the writing center at the University of Tampa sponsored a freshman essay contest, the Wordsmith Awards. By promoting the excellent essays that are produced by many students at all levels of freshman composition, we drew attention to the writing center. It seemed ideal to give awards to freshman writers—the unsung majority of our clientele—and to share in the rewards of recognition that we saw many benefiting from. Aside from the obvious winners, the award-winning writers and the writing center, the contest reflected very well on the freshman composition program, the English department, and the university. The writing center staff benefited from the experience, too, working successfully together on the project. Through a promotion of our writing center that is indirect yet pervasive, the university has seen that we represent and applaud the highest achievers. Now in its second year, the Wordsmith Awards Contest continues to enhance our image.

The center's director, working with two tutors designated "Special Projects Coordinators," set down the contest's basic guidelines early in the semester. Entries were to be final copies of essays written for any freshman composition course taken within the calendar year. We made no further requirements for the papers beyond those given by the instructor, and we requested that all prewriting and rough drafts be attached. Students' decisions to select and submit essays were to be entirely their own.

With the regulations in place, we had to make the university aware of the new contest and to make our project distinct among the other contests and awards that already existed. Many campuses like ours are dominated by literary magazines or school newspapers as showcases for student writing talent; we intended to offer a new opportunity for novice college writers. This was to be an exhibition of the best non-fiction or expressive writing from freshman English courses.

Once we received all the entries, our toughest job was in deciding how the papers were to be evaluated by the staff. We decided on the standard holistic scoring guide which judges essays on a four-point scale (4-Superior; 1-Poor). As a supplement to the holistic guide, the tutors were reminded to keep in mind the customary measures of good composition

writing: organization, clarity, creativity, and mechanics. This seemed to be the fairest way to accommodate such a variety of entries, including documented arguments, informative essays, and expressive pieces.

When we finished tallying the scores, there were four award winners and three Honorable Mentions. The two project coordinators then set out to edit the texts and prepare them for publication, in consultation with writers. We ran into many difficulties early in the publishing process. Since we had no staff member who was familiar with the university's more advanced computer equipment, we had to rely upon the availability of lab assistants to guide us through, and we found ourselves losing valuable time.

To make this project feasible within our small budget, we used our own supplies and other tutors helped in piecing the publication together. The funds for the prizes came from the writing center budget, as well. The total bill for the contest, not including overtime tutor hours, but with prizes, certificates, and supplies, was roughly $300.00.

We distributed the publication to faculty, administration, and students at an Honors Convocation in early April, where the winners received their award. Later, we placed extra copies of the publication in a box that is outside the writing center's door; frequently, we had to replenish the supply. We could feel proud that people were sincerely interested in reading this material. It was worth every sleepless and worrisome hour.

At the beginning of this academic year, one of last year's winners joined the staff as a tutor and one of the project coordinators. With her valuable perspective and our practical knowledge, many processes have been improved upon. We are better organized this year and more confident that the project will be successful. We devised a monthly time-table reminding us of the key steps to be accomplished. We have improved our methods of getting the word out to students, through memoranda and personal letters from tutors. We know now about things that will save us untold trouble; for example, having entrants fill out a brief information form when they submit their essays (professor's name, phone number, present address, next semester address) will keep us from experiencing "the missing winner" crisis. We have even decided to work with the university's printer for a more polished publication, rather than produce it ourselves and risk the problems we had last year.

It is not possible to anticipate all the points of potential failure, but we would not want to suggest that any pitfalls are so serious that the contest could not survive them. In fact, if there had been ways for us to be entirely defeated in our effort, it certainly would have happened in our first year. The process is getting better with practice and our confidence is growing, but we've had fun from the start.

We now realize how beneficial the Wordsmith Awards Contest has been for the Saunders Writing Center and how much good it has done us individually and collectively. The two special projects coordinators forged a solid working relationship that contributed to a more professional environment at the writing center. Tutors, seeing the involvement and dedication of their co-workers, set aside any grumbling about extra work or extended hours.

Until we created the Wordsmith Awards, the attitude around our writing center was rather aloof. Many tutors formed friendships that reached beyond our doors, but few people ever dedicated themselves to developing good working relationships. We were not a team, but a collection of individual tutors—good tutors yet not dedicated tutors. The Wordsmith Awards turned that around. Now, our tutors go out of their way to say, "Hey, is there anything I can do? How is the Wordsmith Awards Contest going?" These awards are no longer the project of one small team, but of the entire center, and we all care about the results. These awards built the cohesive working relationship that was always missing.

As for effects on the contest coordinators who carried this project with them everywhere for over eight months, where else could they have gotten experience as editors, publishers, printers, typists, computer operators, judges, and public relations persons simultaneously? They were all those things and more. For two people who both want to teach English someday to take home a stack of 38 entries to read and judge before morning, was a little foreshadowing of the days to come. It gave all the tutors insight into the difference between non-judgmental tutoring and the difficult job of evaluation professors are required to do.

The faculty entered a cooperative association with their students and the writing center, giving them, among other things, a clearer understanding of our goals. When they suggested students submit to the Wordsmith Awards, a new kind of relationship was broached that would extend beyond the class. Though in our contest rules we tell students to submit the essay they feel is best, instructors' comments, grades, and suggestions are obviously used to make the decision. This provides more opportunities for professors and students to exchange ideas and share perceptions after class hours. We wrote to thank professors for the encouragement they gave their students, and they were pleased when they had guided winners.

Our whole purpose in creating these awards was to prove to the University of Tampa campus—the students, the faculty, the administration—that freshman composition students are producing impressive writing. These are not remedial students; these are not our university's weakest writers. This is where all students begin at all universities, from writing majors to biology majors, and we wanted to remind our university community of this. We are fortunate to have a supportive faculty, especially in English, but we still have to assert our expectation of excellence in freshman composition and writing center achievements. Most of all, though, we wanted the freshman composition students to know that they count and that they are good.

It wasn't long before we saw students responding. One student who frequently worked with us last year came in with a paper she had brought in several months before, and she asked one of the contest coordinators, "Do you think I could submit this essay to the Wordsmith Awards?" The tutor was surprised by this, considering the lack of confidence in her writing this student displayed over the semester. But remembering her perseverance and her many visits to the writing center, the tutor encouraged the student to continue working on her paper and to—by all means—submit it! So as not to compromise the tutor's position as a judge of the papers, she was advised to work with a friend on her revisions. Seeing a student rise up from discouragement and frustration with writing and enter her work in a contest was remarkable. We realized something important about this contest and its uniqueness among contests at the university; we weren't just pitting students against each other for "top prize" or for the title "Best Freshman Essay." We were helping build in them something they will carry with them long after Saunders Writing Center has vanished from their memories: confidence and a positive attitude about their writing. By far, that was the best effect on students we could have hoped to achieve.

Our general sense of the reception of this contest was that freshman composition students were feeling encouraged and gaining more confidence in their work, perhaps because someone was there to tell them, "You're doing a good job." We took a risk, tried something ambitious, and communicated a powerful message to everyone who heard of our contest: our writing center wants to recognize and reward good writers. We were seen as concerned, active, and capable—and engaged in promoting pride in the best writing while continuing our day-to-day sessions with all students working to improve their skills. Our experiences with students who made progress with us, entered the contest, and waited anxiously for news were gratifying, even exhilarating. We want to replicate the sense of pride in learning and succeeding that this contest illuminates—year after year.

Shannon M. Leibrock and
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Tutoring and Learning Disabilities

I have a learning disability in math. Technically, it's called dyscalclia, and it means that although I may be able to comprehend mathematical concepts beyond my training—for example, the ideas of boundaries, differentiating, and integrating—I'm completely incompetent at computation. Long division gives me trouble. There are other students out there with learning disabilities in language, and they have difficulty spelling bisyllabic words and knowing when to use a period. The most important thing a tutor must remember about learning disabled students is that they're not stupid: give them a chance, and you may find they know more about some things than you do.

I'm going to be frank about helping these students with their work in subject areas affected by their learning disability: nobody knows how. Moreover, nobody even knows what causes learning disabilities, much less, just what neurologically (and therefore intellectually) is different about someone with a learning disability. I've heard a lot of quasi-intellectual, self-aggrandizing, and pitifully shallow conjectures about what learning disabilities are and how to fix them. Having a learning disability myself (and I think most learning disabled students would agree), I find these conjectures personally insulting. The truth is, and I've spoken with medical and educational experts on this, that if you can figure out learning disabilities, you might win a Nobel Prize.

Recent history proves this point; until less than twenty years ago, most learning disabilities were mistaken for emotional or psychological disorders. Trust me, I know. When I was twenty-eight months old, Yale child psychologists thought I was out of touch with reality, possibly autistic, and probably in need of life-long institutionalization. Fortunately, my parents didn't believe these ostensibly highly knowledgeable professionals, and they found a neurologist who diagnosed my learning disability. If learning disabilities are often misunderstood in their causes and effects, they're just as often misunderstood in their real-life manifestations. Learning disability is not an acronym for low intelligence, low motivation, or low skills. It is a real condition capable of making otherwise bright students unable to function in some way normally expected by the academic world.

I'm sure you're all waiting to hear how tutors can help learning disabled students. Well, I'll stop just short of saying they can't. I've been on both sides of this equation. I've been the dyscalclic being tutored in pre-calculus, and I've been the tutor helping the dyslexic student with an English 101 paper. As a dyscalclic being tutored in math, I spent thirty or forty hours a week on one math course, and I still had to withdraw at mid-semester with a failing average. I couldn't compute. But, I continued to attend the class because I wanted the information. As a tutor, I've seen papers with lots of good, solid information, but a seemingly hopeless number of syntactical and structural errors. But these errors are not really hopeless, though hope never shows up in the English grades of a dyslexic student.

Just to prove it's not mere wishful thinking to say learning disabled students are smart, I'm going to tell you that I managed a B+ in expository writing two semesters ago. However, I flunked Math 102 and probably still would if I took it again. While I'm on this subject, many dyslexic students don't pass English 101 in a semester. Some start with English 100. The way this school handles these students is by allowing them to take this course over as many semesters as is necessary to get their writing up to speed. Judging from some one-semester English 101 writing I've seen, it's not a bad idea. In most cases, dyscalclic students go through a similar process with math, starting with Math 100 or 101 and taking several semesters to complete this requirement. In many cases, learning disabled students can simply avoid courses affected by their disability and concentrate on ones they're good at. Sometimes they can't; sometimes they must fulfill requirements, and sometimes their disabilities span most subjects. The question still lingers: how can writing tutors help learning disabled students become better writers?

Here, it's useful to suggest the one model scientists have created to illustrate learning disabilities. It's basically a computer with a line or two of missing addresses, or one with a missing chip. Everything else works fine or better than fine, but something's missing. Therefore, in the realm of what's missing, a student hears a foreign language. There's nothing a tutor can do to change this. There's nothing two, or four, or six tutors can do to change this. They might succeed in collectively writing a paper for a student such

that it's not obvious the paper isn't that student's work, but they can't make that foreign language familiar. Only long and tedious hours put in by learning disabled students, learning to compensate for their disability, can begin to make that language familiar. Learning disabled students must learn to accept thinking in learning disabled language, and then to transpose this language into standard language. That is, students can never learn not to think in learning disabled language, but they can learn to change that language into standard language. A learning disabled student understands things in learning disabled language as well as a student without a learning disability does in standard language; but, just as computer programmer cannot write a LOGO program in assembly language, a learning disabled student cannot think, at the most basic level, in the same language most students think in. Unfortunately, there is no standard for decoding learning disabled language. Each individual learning disabled student must decode his/her own specific learning disabled language.It's useless, perhaps even counter-productive, for a tutor to try to decode this language for the student.

Keeping in mind the fact that learning disabled students don't think like other students do and that learning disabled students are smart, my advice to tutors of learning disabled students is the following: treat them just as you treat other students. If tutors attempt to model their tutoring of learning disabled students around the fact that these students are learning disabled, then the students will feel discriminated against, they will dislike the tutor, and they will lose self-esteem. It's much more productive to tutor such students exactly the same way you tutor other students. Walk them through processes that give them unusual difficulty, give them tips and pointers, ask them probing, open-ended, and short-answer questions, and, most important, be supportive. Tell them when they do something right. Encourage them to try and try again, as they inevitably will have to. Be patient and sensitive. Sit back and watch as they decipher their own specific way of thinking; you might learn something about yourself and your thinking.

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