

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 18, Number 1

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

September 1993

...FROM THE EDITOR...

Notice anything different in this issue? I hope so—and I hope you like the new look of the newsletter.

Eons ago (well, actually, seventeen years ago), the newsletter started life as a several-page handout mailed monthly to a group of us who wanted to stay in touch. As both the concept of writing centers and their numbers expanded, the newsletter changed and developed. From a few typed sheets stapled together to colored paper to computer printout to desktop published pages. As a group we matured and became the professionals we are today, with a national organization, regional groups, and our two publications, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and the *Writing Center Journal*. I felt the need to have the newsletter mature a little in appearance too. Besides, sometimes you just need to change and shake things up a bit.

So here it is, a new format for the newsletter. But its purpose remains the same—to keep us all in touch on a monthly basis, reading each other's insights, reflections, and experiences. And I can't think of a better way to start off the first issue in the new format than reading Jeanne Simpson's thoughts on change and innovation.

Welcome back, everyone, as we start a new academic year, and let me know your reactions to—and revision suggestions for—this latest version of the newsletter's format.

Muriel Harris, editor

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The challenge of innovation: Putting new approaches into practice

When I received an invitation to speak to the East Central Writing Centers Association, I struggled with what on earth I might have to say. So, I asked for help. I went to the WCenter e-mail network and asked for suggestions. The questions I chose to use come from Nancy Grimm at Michigan Tech: How do we start thinking of ourselves as innovators or change agents? How do we define our place in the university? Where do we belong, to whom do we report? How can our voices be heard? How can we start to change teaching practices and fight assumptions that are dysfunctional? How can we move out of a service mentality and become shakers and doers?

My first response to those questions is that having a service mentality and being a shaker/doer are not antithetical. They are, to my mind, closely linked. I think the issue is instead one of being pro-active rather than re-active. In creating ourselves as agents of change, we must do some things that sound easy and yet are not easy at all. But they are important. We have first to recognize two things: 1) when an opportunity for change exists and 2) what change we really want.

An opportunity does not usually appear dressed up in its Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes, announcing itself as "THE OPPOR-

TUNITY YOU'VE BEEN WAITING

FOR." Opportunities usually look more like cliff edges or gun muzzles. They are fraught with risk, peril, and, of course, knee-quaking fear. It is easy to ignore such opportunities and to fall back on the dubious comfort of being a victim. Higher education in America right now is looking down one of those gun barrels, one labeled "budget crisis" on one end and "accountability" on the other. The budget problems are hardly exclusive to education. Accountability, on the other hand, is a concept that is particularly focused on education right now, and with good reason.

At the very least those of us in education have not done a good job of explaining what we do. We have been busy guarding our comfort zones. We are frightened when the public shakes its collective fist at us and says, "Clean up your act and do it in a fiscally responsible way, like the rest of us have to." We don't have a huge scandal following us around (though the matter of a professor holding two jobs at two institutions simulta-

neously has certainly raised some tough questions). If the reports in the popular press suggest anything, educators don't look too shiny in the eyes of the public. But the fact is, they pay us. They are our employers and our customers at the same time. If they say we need to do better on the job, we must take their opinion seriously.

We are acutely aware of the fear that comes from this news. We have endured the budget cuts, the rumors, the turf battles, the disappearance of tenure-track positions, travel money, equipment budgets, etc. What we see, if we stop and look, is much hand-wringing and some epic denial. The tendency is to be defensive, to affirm to ourselves that we have been doing our very best and that we are not properly understood, that we are victims of various injustices, etc, etc. Well, we have been doing our best within a defined context. And if we are not properly understood, is it easier to expect our audience to change or is it easier to change ourselves to be more understandable? Is it more effective to complain about being victims or to take positive action to improve our lot?

Those are the unprepossessing elements now that make an opportunity for writing centers and the people who work in them. We can change things. We can make things better, not just for writing centers but for higher education. But we must accept some hard truths first. We must be willing to move out of our old contexts, to be amenable to change. If we want to be doers and shakers, to use Nancy Grimm's terms, we must understand what nature we will assume. Doers and shakers accept that change must occur. Embrace change. Expect it to produce improvement though not without pain. Participate in the process. And accept compromise and changes that are initiated by others as well as by themselves. Doers and shakers recognize risk and accept it. They experience fear but do not let it deflect them nor paralyze them. They recognize that when change really is inevitable—and all indications are that it is inevitable for us—you can either cast yourself on the mercy of the operating forces or you can become part of them. There is no middle ground.

Doers and shakers are not necessarily obvious, do not necessarily accomplish large things. Change is not usually so much a massive convulsion occurring very quickly (let's hope not—the Russian or the French

revolution is not an experience one hopes for) as it is lots of people doing small, telling, important things and doing them steadily. Now, the salient fact in all this talk about doing and shaking is this: we already are doers and shakers. How do I know? Well, for years I have been guided by a handy formula I am embarrassed to admit I remembered from a James Bond novel. To wit: once is accident; twice is coincidence; three times is enemy action.

I have seen enough instances of doing and shaking to know "enemy action" when I see it—neither accident nor coincidence is involved. I note the writing center at Southwest Missouri that got its funding lines changed and support for a greatly expanded role, because its director, there only a few weeks, seized opportunity when he saw it. I note the writing center at Miami of Ohio that has a name attached to it—not just a functional description—and an endowment. Somebody had the initiative to make that happen. I note a call on the WCenter e-mail network for advice on setting up a state-of-the-art, you-call-the-shots, money-is-no-object computerized writing center. Those items came to my attention in the space of about two weeks last fall. "Enemy action" if I ever saw it.

There is much more, of course. Twenty years ago—not much time, really—there was no organized writing center network, just people reaching out to help each other. Now, organized is the word. We have six or seven regional groups, a national organization, two regular, dedicated publications, a dynamic e-mail network, and a growing library of books on the subject. Writing centers are a recognized academic specialty, generating dissertations and job descriptions. Writing centers and the networks and structures around them have been built on the concept of a partnership, on the recognition that students have a right to be successful and that we are obligated to help them to achieve that success. This is a profoundly important idea, and the extent to which we have made it a part of the academic culture is the measure of our ability to achieve important change.

None of these things has happened suddenly or has been directed by a single "great leader." They have happened on the basis of commitment to an idea and willingness to share both effort and glory. And there is

The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, published in ten monthly issues from September to June by the Department of English, Purdue University, is a publication of the National Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement.

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Donations: *The newsletter is an informal publication with no billing procedures. Yearly donations of \$15 (U.S. \$20 in Canada) are requested to cover costs of duplicating and mailing. Please make all checks payable to Purdue University and send to the editor. Prepayment is requested from business offices.*

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plenty left to do. We have established the credibility of writing centers and writing center personnel within the academic community. Having done so, the next step is to use that credibility to make our voices heard. We must borrow the lessons of rhetoric we teach daily in our centers, the same old stuff Aristotle said long ago:

- establish your credentials
- prepare your arguments with facts, comparisons, logical syllogisms, and with emotions
- argue to win
- know your audience

It is the last item that I would urge as the matter we must attend to, to move and shake,

We must remember that people do not resist change, what they resist is being changed.

to encourage change. Our audience is the academy: students, faculty, and administration. It is a beast of intransigent conservatism, even reactionary, in spite of its social role as agent of change. By that I mean that while the academy is the source of new ideas, it is very slow to change itself. Its fondness for its own institutions is large. The academy particularly resists change in its governance structures. I am not suggesting that change here is immediately necessary. I am reminding us that these structures must be understood and navigated if we intend to institute changes in curriculum or teaching approaches.

It is too easy to sit in a writing center and gripe. It is tougher, but rewarding in the end, to get out and participate. To swallow hard and run for student and faculty council seats, to attend committee meetings and offer input, to do the day-to-day dirty work on a campus. But there is where we must offer our ideas if we want them to get down into the bedrock of curriculum. If we want to be agents of change, we must participate in the process directly.

I have, as an administrator, been on the receiving end of a lot of flak about the unwillingness of administrations to support various projects. I don't mind because taking flak is in my job description. But part of the flak I

receive is also about the iniquity of having administration impose change and ideas when that should be the prerogative of faculty. Exactly so. If we want change that is meaningful and long-lasting, it must be done the hard way. It is easy for an administrator to say no to one person. It is less easy to say it to a council, duly elected and accustomed to careful deliberations.

I have been struck by a surprising contradiction, in which many faculty come to me having done not-very-thorough homework, missing important facts, lacking awareness of university structures. Yet these same faculty and, frequently, their students prove daily their ability to do exacting scholarship in which they conduct meticulous research and document it. I am challenging us to apply that same rigorous standard to the matter of improving higher education. Our public constituencies are unimpressed by much of current scholarship; here is an opportunity to regain their respect as we make higher education better.

Let us do the job right: learn thoroughly the structures in which we work, thoroughly get our information gathered, completed, organized and presented in an accessible form. We need to know our audiences: our colleagues, our administrators, our community constituencies. We are experienced agents for change, but our experience has been focused elsewhere. We can shift the focus and use the experience. I said that movers and shakers accept risk. Here is the risk in what I propose. The quality of effort that faculty and students put into their scholarship goes there because that is where the most familiar rewards—safety—are. We do research, write and publish to get degrees or to get promotion and tenure. Service is not valued in the academy as much as scholarship is. We have, as writing center personnel, accepted service as a central value but we have also continued to use the traditional means of scholarship toward achievement, defined as tenure and promotion. We have not really defined achievement as change. Tenure and promotion are a currency of respectability that can be helpful in achieving change, of course. But they are only part of the process.

If we elect to follow the path of institutional service I have described, doing our bit on committees and councils and so on, our scholarship may suffer. There is only so much room for activity in a day. And yet the

content of the scholarship, where so many good ideas now reside, is read mostly by people who already believe and know. As a rhetoric of institutional change, it is more ceremonial than deliberative.

There is much usefulness in conferences. We are invigorated by the energy and inventiveness of our colleagues. We are affirmed in our choices because others have made the same ones. We help and encourage each other, console each other, amuse and praise each other. We need our organizations and conferences. Yet we must understand that they are not the central agents of change in education. The structures on our campuses are. Ideas may first see the light of day at a conference or in a journal, but their ultimate use (or consignment to dusty academic archeology) depends on what we do with them on campus in the committees and councils that monitor curriculum. Budgets happen on campus, not at conferences and certainly not in journals.

We must remember that people do not resist change, what they resist is being changed. Thrusting new ideas at people asks them to do the latter. Working with them, sharing the burdens of governance and curriculum revision is a way of addressing, even embracing change less painfully. We can use the wisdom of Washington Irving, who observed that "there is a certain relief in change, even though it is from bad to worse....it is often a comfort to change one's position and be bruised in a new place." Change of any substance must happen in the institutions where we spend most of our days. And it is there that we must take our energy and ideas. Above all, we will need courage and the willingness to be "bruised in a new place." I believe that we have much of that courage and willingness, and I wish us Godspeak.

*Jeanne Simpson
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Decentering the writing center

Getting outside our own walls

"I'm sending some of my students over to the Writing Center," a colleague says in passing. *Many are sent but few arrive*, I say, but only to myself. Too often the best work of writing centers goes undone because we think of writing centers primarily as *places*. I would like to talk about how to get beyond our own walls—the walls of our physical spaces—but more important, the walls of our own thinking. If we re-figure writing centers as places to go out *from* and not merely places students are sent or come *into*, we offer ourselves a sustaining metaphor for a much more proactive role.

A gradual decentralization or decentering of writing centers can exert a positive centripetal force in the college community and beyond. There are surely a number of ways this can be done, but I will concentrate on those I have recently begun to pursue at Lake Forest College:

- Providing close consultation and regular communication with faculty, through individual and departmental meetings, workshops and memos
- Using peer tutors in classrooms, to confer with faculty, participate in groups, and lead workshops; designating tutors to work with particular faculty and classes on a regular basis
- Scheduling writing center hours in residence halls, study rooms or commons, venues often more hospitable and readily accessible to students
- Sponsoring the more creative activities of writing on campus, such as student and student-faculty readings, student-run writing organizations and publications
- Exploring links with the larger community through writers' foundations, local government, community outreach, and national networks.

Why decenter?

Before describing my own efforts in these directions, I'd like to present something more of a rationale for such an expenditure of time, energy and imagination. In proposing that we cannot simply wait for students to find us in *our* space but that we can create a movable space by reaching out to students and faculty alike, I am not arguing *against* any current role of writing centers. We

should of course have a "home base," a physical space as inviting and conducive as possible to the activity of student writers conferring on their work. Old broom closets, abandoned elevator shafts, and the quiet end of the weight room do not typically meet these simple criteria. (In the printed directions to our own otherwise adequately appointed center, I avoid referring to our location as "in the basement of the library" but rather "in the library, one flight down as you enter.") So, yes, we should be somewhere, somewhere that suggests and facilitates the important work we do.

Having once been a writing center tutor and now director of a writing center, I am struck by the consistent irony that a writing center is usually a college's best underused resource. We can ascribe this to any number of causes, not the least of which is the legacy of writing as a fearfully solitary act. The lone poet laboring away in the garret (now usually by the glow of a computer screen rather than a sputtering candle) is not so removed from the college student more often frozen than fluent before the keyboard late Sunday night. The idea of getting "help" with one's writing is hard to dissociate from a feeling of inadequacy. It does not help that writing centers themselves are historically burdened with a bad case of low prestige, an image still extant and redolent of pseudo-medical associations such as "labs," "clinics" and "remediation"—places to bring ailing, if not failing writing. We know that writing centers are first and foremost places of learning where, far from abdicating to someone else's expertise, students learn better to trust and exercise their authority as writers in concert with attentive readers and listeners. This is not, however, knowledge as common as we might wish.

Providing a space and a staff of tutors simply is not enough. "If you build it, they will come" may work for mythical farmers with a soft spot for the Chicago White Sox of yore, but such agrarian mysticism doesn't work for writing centers. Neither is doing a better public relations job the answer. No amount of colorful brochures and catchy posters will prove of lasting effect. The best word we can get out is the one that students who use the writing center themselves will take out

with them. But first they have to come to us. Or do they?

What if we took the initiative and went to *them*? As it is, too many students are merely "sent" to writing centers by their professors, often after doing poorly on a paper. Little wonder then, that they associate writing center with writing problem, and little wonder their being sent does not always—I'd say often—result in their arrival at the writing center. Other students, on their own, see us as a last (and usually last-minute) resort and bring to their writing center visit the urgency of "improving their paper," leaving the long-term goal of improving their writing largely unaddressed. We know that students who effect substantive change in their writing do so over the course of time and many papers—that drafts, conferences, the rich roil of thinking, rethinking, writing and rewriting are essential to lasting progress. How then, do we get more students to come to us for the long haul? I suggest we ask the question differently: how do we get to *them*?

Certainly, as writing across the curriculum becomes more than a cumbersome phrase for what should be a common reality, we denizens of writing centers need to venture out and across the curriculum ourselves. It argues well for us that writing is less commonly viewed as something English teachers should have taught and students should have learned by the first year of college. Teachers in every discipline are becoming not only more concerned about their students' writing but willing to act on this concern, if assured of some support. We should jump at this chance. And not by telling our colleagues (as surely we don't) to send their worst cases to us. The time is right to go beyond our own walls, to challenge the constraints of our erstwhile reactive roles. If we assert ourselves within and beyond the curriculum, we will communicate the kind of vision and commitment to writing that attracted us to this field in the first place.

Now I would like to move from rationale back to practice and add some detail to the proposals I outlined earlier.

Communicating across the curriculum

Let our colleagues know what we're up to and find out what they're up to. Send out

questionnaires asking what kinds of writing-related activities they would be interested in, would support, or play a role in. I have been encouraged by the response to my own recent inquiries as many faculty indicated interest in a number of my proposals. This has motivated me to initiate meetings with faculty in their own departments. At these encounters I try to do more listening than talking (surely a good conference model) in order to know better how individual teachers and departments view and teach writing in their disciplines. Not incidentally, these "fact-finding missions" stimulate faculty in the same department to engage each other in often spirited talk about writing and teaching. I think that getting teachers talking to each other about writing may be the single most effective thing we can do in this area.

Along with this practice of departmental appearances, I request that faculty, particularly faculty teaching sections of the required First-year Seminar, invite a tutor into their classes to give a brief introduction to the work of the Writing Center. As recently as last year, entering students were introduced to the Writing Center at Lake Forest as part of an orientation campus tour, at which time I talked about the benefits of using the center, how wonderful we were, how we served hot chocolate with or without marshmallows, as they generally glazed over or checked their schedules for the next stop on their itinerary. Having tutors appear in classes after orientation but some time early in the first semester allows students to meet a person they might be working with rather than a place they might go to. I think this also sends the message that we are extending ourselves. Through classroom visits, faculty also learn who the tutors are and how they comport themselves, and as a result are more likely to call upon them in the future.

Memos or brief descriptive notes on conferences can open communication too. Here I mean notes written by tutors after their conference with students and sent by campus mail to faculty. This is a common enough practice but can be tricky. I insist on two things: that no note be sent without the consent of the student and that a copy of the note be kept in the student's tutorial file, with open access to the student. I also leave the bottom part of the note for return responses the teacher might care to make. Still, some tutors feel intrusive or downright presumptu-

ous writing these memos and have suggested that either the student write the notes or that tutor and student co-write. The idea is not to "inform on" students but to bring student, peer tutors, and teacher into partnership. I'm not entirely satisfied with our current version of this instrument but feel that its positive intent outweighs the occasional awkwardness as a means of connecting faculty to our work in the center.

The best communication, however, comes from sharing a common enterprise, and I think well-run faculty workshops provide both an occasion for and an instance of peer collaboration. Although it is worthwhile to organize an occasional longer workshop or conference led by a proven expert from outside our own faculty, more and more I see that in order to sustain interest and effect lasting change in the teaching of writing, we need to provide faculty with regular opportunities to try ideas out in the context of our own ongoing here-and-now. Shorter, informal faculty workshops present such an experimental context. I say "experimental" because I believe that we need not only discuss or debate the teaching of writing, but test our hypotheses against practice. Initially, we writing directors can lead as well as sponsor such workshops but ideally we should find other faculty from different disciplines to collaborate, co-lead and run these workshops themselves. I also invite tutors to participate in faculty workshops, thereby reinforcing the link between tutors and faculty, curriculum and writing center.

Our next such scheduled workshop, "Writing Without Tears," will, I hope, introduce faculty to writing-to-learn techniques which do not add to their "case load" of papers to read and evaluate, or to students' written requirements outside of class. As part of the workshop, two of my colleagues, one from the Mathematics Department and one from the Politics Department, will describe their uses of non-evaluated writing in their current teaching. This collaboration with faculty is instrumental in building grass roots support for the writing center and for writing curricula throughout the college.

"Designated tutors"

Tutors can work in classrooms in a number of ways: to become familiar with a writing assignment, the better to confer with students; to present a brief workshop in writing,

or lead a discussion on some writing issue; and to participate in collaborative writing exercises and small groups. This semester one of our tutors is working somewhat regularly with a philosophy professor in the classroom. The tutor recently led an in-class workshop designed to assist students in getting started on a writing assignment that the professor had discussed beforehand with the tutor and with me. This required a concerted but not complicated triangular effort on our parts, and necessitated that the philosophy professor suspend a certain disbelief in the efficacy of peer teaching in order to agree to having one of his own senior students "take over his class," but as the professor said to me, with a sigh of philosophic pragmatism, "Whatever works."

"Designated tutors," somewhat like designated hitters, are specialists, in that they typically work with a professor in a discipline familiar to them. Unlike designated hitters, however, they don't sit on the bench the rest of the time but do the versatile work of observing classes and conferring with faculty, as well as tutoring individual students from a particular class. In this way, tutors get to know classes up close, over time, while students as well as faculty get to know and develop a mutual trust and working relationship. Professors are then much more likely to say to students, "Why don't you work on this with Worth (or Alison, or Todd, etc.) than "I suggest you go over to the Writing Center." Likewise, students are more likely to seek out the assistance of someone they have already come to know. The writing center thus becomes associated with particular people and is no longer merely a place located in the dim reaches of good intentions. As one of my own first-year students confided to me, somewhat apologetically, "Going to the Writing Center has been on my list of things to do since the beginning of the term." This is a way for students to get it off the list and into action.

Writing center as movable space

This fall we have begun what I hope will prove the beginning of a "Writing Center Without Walls" program, in which we offer tutoring in residence halls, outside our usual hours of operation. After canvassing our tutors on which hours would prove most popular for this residential outreach, they agreed unanimously on Sunday night. It only took a brief if humbling retrospective look at my

own working habits as a college student to see the practical wisdom of this consensus. So, beginning with an open house sponsored by the resident staff of the dorms, we started our off-center hours in two halls located at the north and south ends of campus (the Writing Center is in Middle Campus, along with most other academic buildings). One hall is for first-year-only students, and has a reputation for loud and late hours. The other hall at South Campus is a designated "quiet dorm" at the residential epicenter of our small campus population. I decided against two of the more favored residence halls because they each already had a strong tradition of academic seriousness. The tutoring occurs in reserved study rooms or reasonably quiet though active common space such as lounges.

Early results indicate that these hours are heavily used. Based on these preliminary returns, I am considering moving more of our weekday evening hours from our center in the library to other residence halls, not only to facilitate access but to encourage a habit of earlier conferral, so that Sunday night is not always a lunge for the finish line. Our pro-active presence in the residence halls may predispose students to see the writing center as a true partner, and tutors as the allies and advocates they are. By getting outside our own walls in this way we may more likely see students come into the center during the academic day, and in the process break down the virtual barriers between classroom, residence hall and writing center as loci of learning.

Creative writing centers and circles

As a poet and lover of literature myself, it pains me when the Writing Center is even occasionally seen as some kind of Center for Advanced Research into the Semicolon. If I am ever to be seen running full-tilt away from the Writing Center and in the direction of Lake Michigan, it will be on a day when I have heard one too many students pop in to ask if somebody was available to "go over" their paper (due thirty-five minutes from said request and which only needed to be "checked for grammar"). Yes, we can spell as well as another, and yes, we spend much time with students on all aspects of writing, from brainstorming to editing. We support correct and well-crafted prose. But we are not a grammar garage, a linguistic body shop

where students bring in their papers and have the dents knocked out of them by (as a student referred to our tutors in a recent issue of the campus newspaper) "the worker there." One antidote to this lingering view of writing centers is to become active in the creative life of writing on campus. By chance, I have recently discovered that as Director of the Writing Center I have inherited the role of faculty advisor to a student creative writing organization called "The Circle." Apparently The Circle has lain dormant some time for lack of student or faculty initiative. I have resolved to revive it, get it going again and turn it over to students, while acting as interested party and genial promoter. I'd like to see this "Circle" widen to include all willing students, self-described student literati and tentative neophytes alike in an informal mix of readings, workshops, bookstore visits, and conversations with local writers. I'd like to see, finally, the Writing Center be a true center of writing on campus, in and outside the curriculum and further remove unnecessary divisions between English departments, creative writing, and writing centers.

Community and larger alliances

Going into its second year, a *Young Writers* workshop has been sponsored by the city of Lake Forest, in cooperation with area schools and hosted by the Ragdale Foundation, an artists' and writers' residence of national scope. I was pleased to be invited to lead these eight-week writing workshops for junior high school groups of about eight to ten students each. The collaborative nature of these workshops requires that quite different people and organizations in the community meet and work with each other: city supervisors, the College, local teachers, workshop leaders, and—of course—the students themselves.

The workshops are small, focused and informal. Students receive no grades, pay no fees, and come voluntarily. The modest operational funds come partly from the city coffers and partly from the schools. The Foundation, itself supported by the city, offers the use of its buildings and grounds. I should add here that tutors from the Writing Center join me in these workshops on a regular basis, extending the Writing Center's role and representation in the project.

Recently, I have begun inquiries into other connections between the Writing Center and

the larger community, particularly for people in the community least likely to benefit from the kind of workshop described above. Lake Forest is a wealthy North Shore suburb of Chicago in proximity, however, to poor areas. I have discussed with our College's director of campus activities, who coordinates several College volunteer organizations, the possibility of offering tutoring or small classes for students and adults from nearby communities, to be taught by Writing Center tutors. The College's support for such a project would assert its commitment of community service as part of our essential mission.

Meanwhile, I have been fortunate in furthering an ongoing relationship with what has become a national writing program. Since 1982 I have been an Associate of the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College. This Institute, begun as an intensive summer writing workshop for all entering Bard College students, offers workshops in writing for high school and college teachers nationwide. It has also established summer writing workshops for high school students at five college sites, including as of last summer, Lake Forest College. Besides the important recognition of an affiliation with this National Writing Network, the Writing Center and Lake Forest college itself become participants in a larger conversation on the teaching of writing. In consulting with summer workshop directors at other sites, as well as with colleagues at Bard College, two of whom led last summer's high school workshop, I also reap the benefits of renewal in my own thinking and teaching of writing. As home base to this workshop, the Writing Center simultaneously extends itself far beyond its doors, into similar endeavors in New York, Massachusetts, Ohio, North Carolina, and Oregon. Thanks to generous funding from the Bingham Trust, we were able to award a number of full and partial scholarships to capable and interested students whose families could not meet the tuition, thereby opening the workshop to a more diverse base of high school students.

When writing centers create partnerships of this kind, they add measurably to their repertory and prestige, while responding to the pressing need for better high school education and college preparation in writing and critical thinking.

Back at the center

What writing centers are always the center of is education in writing. Whatever the particular constraints and resources of our writing centers, I propose that we can serve not only the students who seek us out, but many others who do not. Further, we can enlist the support of faculty across the curriculum by demonstrating our commitment to the needs of learning and writing in their disciplines. To do so, however, we need to take the initiative, start the conversation, enact change. I submit that we do this best by venturing from our physical and metaphorical centers in ways I have outlined and in other ways.

In doing so we need not fear we are neglecting the essential business of writing centers. Individual conferences are at the heart of our work and should be. Having the chance to sit down and discuss one's writing with an adept reader and attentive listener is, quite simply, a gift. I am suggesting ways we can share this gift more generously. Nor does getting outside our walls mean abandoning our centers to administrative anarchy or risking hostile takeover at the hands of the Storage Committee. Rather, by moving out from our centers we strengthen our mission, creating as we do the wider knowledge and deeper trust so vital to our enterprise.

Alan Devenish
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Lake Forest, IL

Two readers request....

The Director and the ESL Specialist at Whatcom Community College are looking for good writing-related software and would appreciate help from others in our newsletter group. Please send them a list of the computers and software you have, your wish list for new software, and a list of the most important references you keep in your lab (specific dictionaries, resources for ESL, etc.). If you have suggestions for what you would change about the physical set up of your center if you were to expand or move, they'd appreciate that too. Send to:

Barbara Hudson, Director/ Alice Richards, ESL Specialist
Writing Center
Whatcom Community College
237 W. Kellogg Road
Bellingham, WA 98226

New from NCTE

The following are books recently published by the National Council of Teachers of English and may be ordered from NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.

Dynamics of the Writing Conference: Social and Cognitive Interaction. Ed.

Thomas Flynn and Mary King. 128 pages, paperbound. Price: \$16.95; NCTE members: \$12.95. (LC: 93-12735)

The essays, which originated as papers presented at East Central Writing Centers Association conferences over the last ten years, address two primary questions: How do writing conferences foster the development of writing ability? How can teachers give students control of their own writing and the writing conference to promote higher-order thinking? The first set of essays focuses on strategies for building a collaborative relationship; the second set of essays focuses on cognitive strategies which maximize the interaction between teacher-experts and student-novices; and the final set of essays addresses students' growth as independent writers.

A Kind of Passport: A Basic Writing Adjunct Program and the Challenge of Student Diversity. NCTE Research Report No. 24, by Anne DiPardo. 202 pages, paperbound. Price: \$16.95; NCTE members: \$12.95. (LC: 92-41740)

This research report looks at culturally diverse students and the adequacy of efforts to help them succeed in college. By means of an ethnographic study of a basic writing course on a traditionally white campus, the author presents us with a complex picture of student tensions, shortcomings in the program, the results of lack of adequate training, and university concerns about such programs.

The Practice of Theory: Teacher Research in Composition, by Ruth E. Ray. 191 pages, paperbound. Price: \$19.95; NCTE members: \$14.95. (LC: 92-41456)

Rejecting the prevalent tendency to reject teacher inquiry, the author proposes teacher research as a model for redirecting composi-

tion studies to open up new avenues to knowledge and professional growth. Ray traces the path of academic composition studies over the last twenty years away from practice and towards various models for research and scholarship drawn from science and the social sciences. She calls such models inappropriate to a discipline concerned with the teaching of writing and maps the road to reintegration by using teacher research and by offering courses that show how teacher research can broaden the dimensions of graduate study in composition.

Scenarios for Teaching Writing: Contexts for Discussion and Reflective Practice, by Chris Anson et al. 160 pages, paperbound. Price: \$16.95; NCTE members: \$12.95. (LC: 92-47414)

This book, designed for use in graduate seminars or training workshops for teaching assistants and as a thought-provoker for both tenure-track faculty and for adjunct and part-timers, looks at key issues and problems that writing teachers face on a daily basis. Through vignettes drawn from actual experience of the various authors, it looks at creating effective assignments; using reading in writing courses; responding to student writing; teaching grammar, usage, and style in context; and managing discourse in classes, conferences, and small groups. A final set of scenarios deals with course design for teaching writing. The authors do not aim to present solutions or models to imitate and do not intend to advocate particular approaches to writing. They aim instead to "bring to life in realistic settings the theoretical and varied approaches" characteristic of the field.

VOICES FROM THE NET

Reshaping writing instruction in the writing center image?

Writing center scholars have challenged the notion that the main purpose of writing centers is remediation. They have argued that writing centers should not reside at the fringes—physically and politically—of their institutions. Fred Kemp, writing on WCenter* this summer, took the concept even further, giving it an assertive twist that struck some writing center specialists as both sensible and radical. Why not, he asked, reshape writing instruction as a whole according to writing center pedagogy? It is a provocative question, troubling and exciting at the same time. What follows are excerpts from the ensuing conversation, edited for length.

Friday, 18 June 1993

From: Fred Kemp

This is probably a completely hairy idea, but what the heck.

Following upon Sharon [Thomas's] description of sending wc tutors into the classrooms: Has anybody ever thought of setting up freshman composition itself as one big writing center?

Can you imagine what would happen if a large university took its freshman composition budget and procedures and decided to move from the classroom model to a tutorial model? Immediately most of you will say, "Can't happen. Logistically impossible." Oh really? Anybody ever thought it through? Maybe there ARE logistical matters I'm not conversant with. But what the heck. Has anybody ever thought of pulling writing centers in from the periphery and making them the whole enchilada of writing instruction at the freshman level?

Saturday, 19 June 1993

From: Mickey Harris

I think it's a terrific idea, but a couple of "ya, buts" from this end: Ya, superb movement in a direction we all agree is an excellent way to work on writing. But... how do administrations fund all the person-power needed? And from our perspective, what happens when our traditional freedom from

being evaluators disappears? That is, if the center becomes the "classroom" in some form, someone has to do the evaluating, and how will that affect what our type of collaboration is? How would we hang on to that very real collaborator role?

Sunday, 20 June 1993

From: Joan Mullin

Those of us who work as tutors and teach comp probably find our classes looking more and more like writing centers, so we know it works well. Computers make that even more possible—especially with networking capabilities. I always hoped that by making connections with comp teachers, we could eventually win them over to a "writing center" classroom model. That may be the way to go. The tutor-linked classes in disciplines (we've had these for four years now) have certainly convinced those in other disciplines that writing center models work!

Sunday, 20 June 1993

From: Fred Kemp

Writing is an activity, a physical and mental doing. I see incredibly little of that in traditional classrooms. The engagement in one-on-one is much closer to "doing." Can it happen with all the institutional constraints that Mickey (quite correctly, I think) proposes?

Maybe the problems are more in our own minds than in what is really out there. Maybe not. Karen Schwalm at Maricopa CC is moving toward a freshman class that writes instead of listens in its writing classes, only they aren't so much classes as individuals communicating with individuals. Sure, it's on computers, but what isn't? Could five thousand freshmen "do" freshman composition by linking to tutors in something like WCenter?

Anyway, let's think about it. No reason to suppose that everything has to be the way it is just because it has to be the way it is.

Sunday, 20 June 1993

From: Mickey Harris

OK, Fred, as long as we are really delving into "why not" territory, why not dump freshman comp? I'm not sure that I can make a truly comprehensive and valid case for it anyway. Why not a writing center environment to accompany students all the way through their coursework? OK, so now the WAC people are going to include me at the end of their gun barrels too, but... why not let writing happen wherever it happens in the learning process with tutors ready to help? Hmm, or have I just done a 360 degrees and wound up back to where we's already are?

Monday, 21 June 1993

From: Jeanne H. Simpson

There is no good educational reason to keep freshman comp in its present format (dating from when? late 1800's?)

The problem, then, is not curricular, it's political. Freshman comp is the reason most English depts. are among the largest (here, THE largest) on a campus. That's the vested interest in keeping the status quo. Concocting curricular/educational arguments for changing the way we teach writing is fairly simple. Any good assessment program will show that the old way is simply not very effective in proportion to the bucks spent. The problem is that nobody wants that noticed; the bucks are much wanted.

Now is a good time to start making those arguments. With the understanding that there is political risk in doing so. Enemies will pop out of the woodwork. And never underestimate the ferocity with which academic territory is usually defended.

Wednesday, 23 June 1993

From: Joan Mullin

It seems that as we talk about moving the great mountain of composition pedagogy and politics we're really talking about closing the gap between what our research and experience in writing centers (and composition studies) tell us and what is practiced and institutionalized. For years and years and years I've said (for one reason or another)

"Blow up the schools!" What I mean by that is that as long as we are confined by the physical box-like structures that contain us, we will continue to put band-aids on problems instead of radically restructuring. Of course, the realist in me knows there's not enough dynamite. . . or people to ignite it.

Wednesday, 23 June 1993

From: Dave Healy

Traditionally, writing centers have been defined as "support services." Being cast in a supportive role has its downside, as we all know, but in many ways it's a comfortable position. Supporters don't have to lead, don't have to initiate, don't have to confront the opposition head-on.

Our problem is that our work in the writing center is by its nature mostly derivative. Writers come to us with works they created and assignments someone else created. We respond. So we live and move and have our being in an atmosphere, a place, that is intrinsically reactive. Consequently, we have become very good at salvaging, redeeming, preserving. But we're not so good at designing, initiating, exploding. Our very strengths, in other words—what makes us attractive to and effective with the writers who come to us—turn out to disadvantage us in the effort to force institutional change.

Thursday, 24 June 1993

From: Katherine McManus

I think we need to keep in mind that most of the most highly respected educators since time began would tell us that what we do to young, older, and old people in the name of education has nothing to do with learning. Fred's radical revision is closer to what should be done, or might be done, but even those sensible suggestions cannot be accommodated by our rigid, top-down, "factory-school" styled institutions.

*The comments in this column were posted to WCenter, an electronic forum for writing center specialists hosted by Texas Tech University. The forum was started in 1991 by Lady Falls Brown, writing center director, and it is managed by Fred Kemp, director of composition. Anyone who has access to Bitnet or the Internet can subscribe to the group by sending e-mail addressed to: LISTSERV@TTUVM1.BITNET. Leave the subject line blank and in the first line of the note, put: SUB WCENTER Your Name and if you have problems, write to Fred Kemp at: YKFOK@TTACS.BITNET.

A reader responds. . .

Reading Shannon Leibroch and Lisa Bernbaum's article "Awards for Writers Reward Writing Centers," in the May 1993 issue of the newsletter (Vol. 17, No.9), prompted me to share with readers the similar success we have had at the high school level. For the past three years the Deerfield High School writing center has sponsored a writing contest, run almost exclusively by our peer tutors, for the purpose of highlighting and publishing those students who are particularly talented writers. Benefits to us are that this activity also promotes the writing center, attracts attention to us, and gives our peer tutor staff an additional important responsibility. For them, there are very practical lessons in collaboration. Because we are always looking for ways to evaluate our staff, it gives us further insight into who the most diligent tutors are and identifies those who are unwilling to give that extra effort. All the peer helpers involved learned that having a successful contest is no easy job; there is a great deal of work required.

We keep a folder, begun by the tutors during the planning stage of the first contest, which outlines the procedures to be followed. This has been of tremendous help, a real timesaver. Additions are made to the folder each year as the tutors learn more about conducting this kind of activity.

At the start of the second semester, the tutor leaders get the ball rolling by asking their fellow tutors to sign up for committees. Then each committee chooses a leader. The various committees include Publicity, Rules, Judging, and Fundraising. Since prizes are in cash and substantial, the tutors need to raise considerable sums of money. They hold bake sales, which always are popular in high schools. And this last year, through our Director of Student Activities, we also sold entertainment cards sponsored by local merchants. For five dollars the holder was entitled to large discounts at various fast-food emporiums. These fund raisers, plus a generous donation from our principal—tutor solicited—enable us to secure the prize money.

It was decided that in order to make the competition fairer this year, the entrants would qualify either as intermediate, (fresh-

men and sophomores,) or advanced, (juniors and seniors). Judging of intermediate level entries was all done by the tutors. Since some of the tutors, juniors and seniors, submitted their own work or were familiar with pieces submitted by friends, they felt it would be unfair to judge the advanced entries; therefore, that job was delegated to the faculty. I made suggestions on how to evaluate holistically; however, these were only suggestions. The tutors were free to adopt the best methods they themselves devised. Because the peer helpers took time to organize before beginning their task, the judging went smoothly and, they proclaimed, surprisingly fast.

When all the winners were determined, we published their entries in loosely bound books—one copy went to the principal while others are on tables in the center, easily available for everyone to read and enjoy. One of the jobs of a writing center should be to advertise good writing, and what better way is there than making it visible.

Our writing contest is now a yearly event. It takes much time and energy; however, when the job is complete we all agree the effort is worthwhile. The tutors rise to new heights and take on a new dimension. The writing center gets publicity and more confidence is instilled in some of the contest winners. In fact, the tutor/sister of the first prize winner in the intermediate non-fiction category was so thrilled at her sister's achievement that she told me that it was the best thing that could have happened to Wendy because she never saw herself as a decent writer and had no confidence in her ability before becoming a winner. Almost without exception, the Deerfield writing contest is a student activity which has truly enhanced our writing center.

*Penny Frankel
Deerfield High School
Deerfield, IL*

Listening: To establish rapport, to comprehend students' perceptions, to hear an essay, to check a student's perceptions

Much of the literature on individual student conferences discusses listening. But what listening really entails is not so well detailed. Listening well is important because, in the words of an old Welsh proverb, "He understands badly who listens badly." Listening requires hearing words, recognizing tone, sensing body language, noticing voice pitch and rate of speech. When a student is nervous, her voice will be high pitched and she will speak rapidly. If a student has a negative attitude, it will be apparent not only in what she says but also in body language. Listening can be mechanical or creative, and the better writing lab tutor will listen more creatively than others. Furthermore, listening and comprehending what is heard must precede statements of advice or instruction. Sometimes communication is emotional, not rational. Therefore, we might have to draw on our own emotional experiences to understand exactly what is being communicated. A speaker may omit certain facts or feelings, say one thing and mean another, or try to present evidence in an embellished way. The listener has to sort through all of these "surface" presentations to get at what is really being said.

Listening is important in at least four ways. First, we need to listen to establish rapport. Then, we listen to comprehend students' perceptions about their writing. Third, we also hear what the essays themselves say. Finally, we listen to verify what students hear during the conference. Each of these functions is different and requires different interpretive skills.

The need to listen and establish a relationship begins as soon as a student walks through the door of the writing lab. No two people come with exactly the same problems—even though they may be working on exactly the same assignment. Similarly, no two tutors work in exactly the same way. Students and tutors bring to a conference the sum of their personalities, self-image, and backgrounds—ethnicity, education, learning/teaching style, and attitudes. Because of these differences, a working rapport is established only if and when the participants listen well.

All students feel at least a bit awkward the first time they meet with a writing tutor. It is important that the tutor "hear" this uncertainty as the first few minutes of a conference set the tone for the rest of the meeting and possibly for the entire relationship. I have the student sit next to me, not across a table or desk, and explain what will happen during a conference. At the same time, I ask the student something about himself ("Where are you from?" or "Where did you go to high school?" or "What is your major?") to encourage the student to relax and allow me to decide if he will react more positively to assertive or non-assertive techniques.

A student may appear at the writing lab and say, "I want my paper proofread." Since proofreading is frowned upon in the writing lab, the tendency might be to send away such a student or to suggest an editor. But if we listen with understanding, we might realize that "proofreading" is a term often employed by students to cover a whole realm of functions in the writing process. "Grammar" and "punctuation" are other umbrella terms that students often use in the same way.

A second listening strategy occurs when students talk about their writing. One important thing to listen for is the student's perception of the assignment. It is a good idea to compare it to the instructor's perception, if this is possible. Having the student restate the intent of the assignment is often very revealing. Many students will follow only those instructions they can easily understand, and they (conveniently) forget those they feel are too difficult. For example, when an assignment asks the student to "summarize" and "evaluate" an idea or concept, the student may summarize for four pages and then attach a one-page evaluative statement. But the instructor may clearly have wanted a short summary followed by a much longer evaluation.

Some assignments are long and contain lots of suggestions the student has to sift through. Statements like "You may want to consider..." or "Think about these things as you plan your paper" are not absolutes. Stu-

dents often need to filter through these teacher suggestions to get the main idea of the assignment. Similarly, if I listen to what the student thinks is required, I may "hear" if the student recognizes the key words and functions of the question. For example, many times students will dwell on a subject which is not the core of an assignment. Consider this sociology assignment:

"Read Ahren's 'The Great Football Ritual' and Cleaver's 'Blood Lust.' Using these essays as models, choose and define an activity (such as the drive-phenomenon, rites of death or birth, courtship rituals) as a symbol of some aspect of American society. Make sure your essay reveals more than just something about the activity; it should cause the reader to think critically about the society which produces and enjoys the activity.

The student would have to recognize that the word *define* provides a key function and that *symbol* represents a focus. The student also has to recognize that the phrase "cause the reader to think critically" requires the kind of generalization and support that questions society's values. Some students would not concentrate on the symbolism of an activity, but rather on the activity itself. And they might write generally about American culture, even though some aspect of American culture will form the topic's parameters.

As students talk about their writing, a good listener will probably listen "between the words" to determine priorities for the conference. A tutor might ask a student what she wishes to work on and then listen carefully to both the content and the tone of the answer. Many times, the answers are so broad and unrealistic that an instructor can quickly shift the student's attention to the most pressing problems in the paper. For example, I might ask a student, "What is it that you are concerned about? What do you want me to look for in this paper?" The student might answer with something like, "Well, I want you to see if it 'flows.' Does it all go together and are there any goofed-up sentences?" Given this response, I quickly suspect that the student really has no idea what the problems might be and is probably look-

ing for reassurance that the paper won't be an embarrassment and might even be worthy of a decent grade. Furthermore, this student may be looking to me to give credence to the paper. In other words, the student can tell the class instructor, "Well, the tutor in the writing lab said that it was okay" or a "good paper" or "acceptable" or—God help us!—that "it flowed." In this case, I nudge the student into looking critically at organizational concerns—if those are prevalent in the paper—or adequate support, or linking ideas, or whatever else may be a problem.

Other times a student will answer very specifically when asked what she wants to work on. For instance, her body language and tone of voice may indicate punctuation is a major concern. She may have had punctuation marked on previous papers and now wants to work just on this issue. If I sense a student feels strongly about sentence level concerns, I review some of the rules and work through the first page or so with the student. Then, if more global issues need attention, I mention them and suggest that the student schedule time to work on these, either on this paper or on future papers. Because I have taken my cues from the student, the approach is non-threatening and encourages the student to return for additional, more appropriate help. Besides, this places the responsibility on the student for both revisions and additional meetings.

Students' early analyses of what they've written also reveal something about the organization (or lack of it) and the thinking that preceded the writing. A student might say something like "I think there may be a problem with the organization here." The student may be absolutely right. But as we read the essay, we may realize organization is not the real problem at all, but rather that fuzzy thinking has precluded any logical presentation. And so, we have to transcend what we hear and react to the innuendoes or suggestions that may only echo between the lines of discourse.

Active silence, if successful, also can enhance students' abilities to solve their own writing problems, especially organizational

ones. Many times students can verbalize more clearly than they think they can write. As a result, I often ask students "What are you trying to do in this paper? Tell me about your thesis statement? How did you develop it?" As the student then answers these questions, I listen carefully for what may be missing. Although it is very difficult to be silent, I try to keep my response to a simple "uh huh," a nod, or "okay." A student needs time to think before responding. When the student does respond and talk about his essay, he may recognize gaps, clarify issues, and solve organizational problems for himself. As the student talks, I jot down what the student says and eventually read this back to him. This technique may clarify structure for him very quickly.

As students talk about their papers, it is also important to listen for their perceptions about their abilities to write a successful paper. This is especially important for students who have special needs. Some students who come to the writing lab hate writing because it has always meant failure. Last week, for example, a student told me that he is embarrassed about his writing. Students like this appear to be not interested in learning to write better but instead are concentrating on simply getting a better grade. But I heard his tone of voice and his hesitancy. I asked a few tactful questions such as "What sorts of things are you concerned about, based on other papers that you have handed in?" or "What kinds of problems does this teacher think that you need to work on?" I soon realized that he always had papers returned with lots of red ink marking "awk's" or "r-o's" or "frag's." He had always been rather unsuccessful in communicating in the way that a teacher thought communication should occur; consequently, he had no confidence and merely wanted to get this "theme" ordeal over with.

So, after some initial chit-chat about football, we read through his essay, which he admitted he had help on. After discussing the purpose and the structure of the essay with him, I asked him to write a conclusion. I discovered that his problem was largely spelling—at least on this paper. If the spelling

problems were overlooked, however, the conclusion was entirely appropriate. When he realized that I would be non-judgmental about his spelling, he was willing to talk about the other issues in his paper.

A third listening strategy requires hearing what a student draft itself says. Since many student papers lack focus, it is imperative to listen carefully as a draft is read. With some students, I might read just the conclusion and tell the student what I expect in the paper. If this meets the student's goals, then the assignment's focus is probably appropriate. But usually there is a gap between what the conclusion states (or, for that matter, what the introduction promises) and the body of the paper. Sometimes, all the parts of an argument are present but there is no logical link between them. As the student reads the draft, I "listen" for the missing generalizations and grammatical links.

As the draft is read, I also listen for attention to audience. An introduction may begin, "Violence on television demonstrates the demise of our value system." But the student may describe several types of violence on TV or several violent TV shows. As the student reads the essay aloud, I pay attention not only to what I hear, but also to what I do not hear—those generalizations which tell the reader why a group of details is important. The student may have a great analysis, good details, good organization. But if the generalizations about the evidence are lacking, if the connections are not clear, if the reader wants to ask "So What?," then the essay needs additional revision to become reader-friendly. If together we can develop a generalization which relates to the thesis statement for one group of details, chances are that the student will be successful providing the appropriate implication for other groups of details as well.

This is also a good time to listen for the other needs. The first, of course, is organization. It should be very clear to the reader which points are major, which are minor, how they relate to each other and to the thesis statement. Thought progression should be obvious; it usually becomes obvious

when the implications of the evidence and transitions are clear. A second concern is the style of the sentences—are they appropriate, varied, graceful? And finally, a tutor will “listen” for obvious grammatical mistakes such as incomplete sentences, misused or missing punctuation, agreement problems, and so on.

It is at this point—the reading of the draft—that we are most tempted to revise a draft in our own image. But we have been told to coach, not clone. Some students need more help than others and as tutors, we have to know just how much that is. So when we “listen” to drafts being read, how much “help” can we give? Barbara Walvoord, in *Writing Strategies for All Disciplines* (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986), suggests that we consider levels of response when we “hear” problems with a paper. A tutor can respond at different levels, depending on a student’s ability—and judging the ability level depends a lot on listening skill. Responding to a confusing section of a draft by saying “I don’t understand this” or “I lost interest here” may be adequate to prompt some students to revise appropriately. Including the reason that something doesn’t work is a second level response: “I don’t understand this because . . .” gives the student a reason why something doesn’t work and now she must find out how to solve the problem. Or I might say, I don’t understand this because . . . and to fix it you need to . . .” In this case, I would include a couple of alternatives because this student probably cannot or will not find them for herself.

Finally, we need to listen to check on what a student has heard and inferred during the conference. While it seems obvious, we sometimes forget that everyone reacts better to praise than to criticism, so it follows that finding something good to say when we “hear” a negative attitude will also be productive. If a student’s draft demonstrates really good ideas or other stylistic qualities, I tell her. This allows me to talk about less successful elements of the paper. Praise (or criticism) has two parts: the words that we state and the inferences that the student draws. So it is important to remember to praise the draft or something about the draft, not personality or intelligence or ability. In other words, it is better to say “This topic is very provocative, but I think that the reader might have a problem with the transition between these ideas” rather than “the ideas fall apart here and you don’t indicate how these

ideas are related.” In the first statement, the reader appears responsible for the problem and the student thinks, “Well, I’m a better writer than I thought.” In the second example, however, the student may think “Gee, I can’t do anything right.”

As the conference ends, I ask the student to summarize what we talked about and to jot down a few notes. This way, he has some concrete goals to work on at home, and it gives me the chance to check on what he heard or interpreted and to correct any misconceptions. I am sometimes surprised by the student’s perception of what we discussed; had we not reviewed, however, the student might have gone home, revised based on that perception, and been terribly disappointed in the result. In addition to the disappointment the student may experience, however, the opportunity to teach something positive may have vanished—all unnecessarily.

The four listening strategies are not mutually exclusive, and one does not necessarily begin when and where another ends. The rapport established early in a conference can be destroyed at any point by misjudging a student’s learning style. And a tutor can easily misinterpret what a student voices as a priority if a predetermined agenda takes precedence over an immediate, specific problem. But a sensitive tutor will listen well to a student’s words, both in conversation with that student and on the paper the student produces.

Janet Fishbain
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Calendar for Writing Centers 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

October 23: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in Chico, CA
Contact: Judith Rodby or Thia Wolf, English Department, California State University, Chico, CA 95929 (916-898-4449)

March 5: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Baltimore, MD
Contact: Tom Bateman, 3708 Chestnut Ave., Baltimore, MD

May 6-7: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Toledo, OH
Contact: Joan Mullin, Writing Center, U. of Toledo, 2801 W. Bancroft, Toledo, Ohio 43606-3390 (419-537-4939).

TUTORS' COLUMN

What's in a name?

This past term I was working in our writing center when a professor came in and said that she had explained the writing center to some students who had inquired about it. My first thought was "isn't that nice." I quickly became disturbed, however, because she said she had used an analogy, comparing the assistance available at the writing center to the assistance available from a tutor. I cringed; I had never thought of myself as a tutor, and the more I thought about what she had said, the more certain I became that I wasn't a tutor in the usual sense of the word. I began to see the differences between my responsibilities as a writing center consultant and the job of a tutor, differences which were not included in the comparison made by our well-intentioned professor.

In her comments, our visiting professor lumped together two different peer relationships, the one of the typical academic tutor directing the student needing help, and the one of a writing center consultant collaborating with a student. I had never noticed the possible confusion between these two jobs because at our writing center we call ourselves consultants instead of tutors. The *Webster's New International Dictionary* defines a tutor as "one who has charge of the instruction of another in any branch, or in various branches, of learning; specif. a) A private teacher or instructor." In defining consultants, the same source says that it is "one who consults another," and in the definition of consult it says "to seek the opinion or advice of another; to take counsel; to deliberate together; to confer." These distinct titles emphasize the difference in the techniques used when working with students.

Tutoring can often become an unbalanced learning experience, a parasitic teacher/student situation. Tutors have knowledge of a subject, and it is their job to supply students with information that will assist the student's understanding. Since tutors know basically what they will be teaching, they come to their sessions prepared. So, while the tutors may reinforce what they have learned in the

past by teaching it, they are not inevitably learning new things the majority of the time.

In contrast to meeting with a tutor, a meeting with a writing center consultant involves a student/student relationship. I have learned more as a writing center consultant than in any other job I've had. I come in contact with so many opportunities to learn not only about writing, but also about the subjects of various papers and the people who write them. In consulting, unlike tutoring, anyone at any ability level can seek help. While we do have some conferences in our writing center in which our consultants give out rules about standard written English, we have many more that consist of simply discussing a paper. Perhaps one reason why so many of our conferences become extended conversations is that we employ freshmen through seniors of any major, and therefore we are not necessarily more knowledgeable, in either writing ability or experience, than the students with whom we meet. We do not always have the right answers but simply provide suggestions coming from a different point of view. Also, while tutors excel in the area in which they are tutoring and therefore are prepared when they go into their sessions, consultants do not know in advance what they will be discussing, as each paper is unique. In the majority of conferences, the first time we see a paper is at the beginning of the conference with the author sitting next to us, waiting. Therefore, we must respond with our immediate impressions of the writing.

I remember a conference in which I was handed a paper on *Hamlet*. As I read the paper, the student sat at the table, watching me. When I finished reading, I had no specific questions, just a couple of small points to mention, which I used to begin our discussion. Although I had no plan for our discussion, the talking was productive for both of us, and the conference went well. However, after the conference was over, my mind continued to toss around the ideas from the paper. I thought, "Why didn't I say that?" Or

"Gee, she could have done this." I felt bad. I thought I should find her and share my new ideas with her, but at some point in my thinking, I realized my job didn't require giving her any answers. This was the first time I had really known what my job was, or perhaps better stated, what it wasn't. The thoughts I had after she left might have given the conference and possibly the paper a different outcome, but not necessarily one that was better. While my ideas about improving her paper may have been useful, a unique value of consulting is the fresh, immediate response that consultants give when they first encounter a student's text.

First-impression responding is important. Although a professor has much more knowledge about the subjects of his paper assignments than consultants, each individual paper is still new to him just as it is new to those of us in the writing center. By providing an immediate response, consultants give students a chance to see what reaction their papers could produce from a professor. The partial or total ignorance that we often have of the paper's subject can also be helpful because we, as uninformed readers, are able to ask questions that will let the student know what is clear and what is not. It worries me to think that people who define a tutor as I do may hear the professor's description of the writing center and decide that, since their writing is not a problem, they would not benefit from a consultation.

In tutoring sessions, many students come to the tutors expecting them to be experts on the subject, putting them in the role of teacher. In contrast, in writing center conferences the two people involved may successfully function at various levels of understanding. So, in our conferences, we get to the heart of writing consultations, creating an interaction of perspectives.

Karen Sue Kennedy
Coe College
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

**East Central Writing
Centers Association**

Call for Proposals
May 6-7, 1994
Toledo, Ohio
"Reaching Out, Reaching In: Defining Ourselves and Our Communities"
Keynote speakers: Lester Faigley and Ray Wallace

Send one-page proposals, before Jan. 31, to Joan Mullin, Writing Center, U. of Toledo, 2801 W. Bancroft, Toledo, Ohio 43606-3390 (419 - 537-4939; e-mail: art0019@UofT01. UToledo.edu).

**Pacific Coast Writing
Centers Association**

October 23, 1993
Chico, California
"Reimagining the Practices and Purposes of the Writing Center"
Keynote speaker: Marilyn Cooper

For information, contact Judith Rodby or Thia Wolf, Department of English, California State University, Chico, CA 95929-0830 (916-898-4449).

**Council of Writing
Program
Administrators**

Oct. 8-10, 1993
Oxford, Ohio
"Composition in the 21st Century: Crisis and Change"

For conference information, contact Don Daiker (513-529-7110/5221). To obtain a registration form (which must be sent in by Oct. 1), contact Composition in the 21st Century, Dept. of English, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio 45056.

**National Conference
on Peer Tutoring in
Writing**

Nov. 5-7, 1993
Allendale/Grand Rapids, MI

Of the 150 presenters from Maine to New Mexico, Florida to Winnepeg, over half will be peer tutors. Special conference fees and accommodation rates for peer tutors. For information, contact Deanna Collins, NCPTW, Dept. of English, 101 Lake Superior Hall, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI 49401; phone: 616-892-5278 (phone or fax); Internet: footew@gvsu.edu.

Minutes of the National Writing Centers Association Executive Board Meeting, April 3, 1993, San Diego Conference on College Composition and Communication

Board Members Present: Lady Falls Brown, Nancy Grimm, Patricia Dyer, Gilda Kelsey, Byron Stay, M. Clare Sweeney, Albert DeCiccio, Christina Murphy, Ed Lotto, Ray Wallace, Diana George, Jim Upton

Guests Present: Maggie Hassert, Judy Kilborn, Barry Brunetti, Kirsten Benson, Don Bushman, Alan Jackson, Garry Ross, Anne E. Mullin, Donna Reiss, Tamara Bolotow, Clara Fendley, Barry Maid, Joan Mullin, Eric Hobson, Susan Blalock

President Lady Falls Brown called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. Minutes of the November meeting were approved.

Executive Secretary's Report

Nancy Grimm, executive secretary, reported a treasury balance of \$5018.90. She reminded members of the NWCA services, including starter folders for new writing center directors, dissertation research support, and regional conference support. This spring there will be an election for the at-large and the community college board positions. Nomination forms are available from Grimm.

Old Business

- a. Alan Jackson announced the completion of an NWCA brochure, a project he coordinated with Eric Hobson. Five thousand brochures were printed at a cost of \$270, thanks to the support of Dekalb College. Members were encouraged to assist with distribution. For copies of the brochure, contact Alan Jackson, Dekalb College, 2101 Womack Road, Dunwoody, Georgia 30338. The board expressed appreciation to Jackson and Hobson for their work.
- b. Copies of the Writing Center Directory are still available for \$15 from Pam Farrell-Childers, The McCallie School,

2850 McCallie Avenue, Chattanooga, TN 37404.

Reports

- a. *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Lady Falls Brown shared the following news from Mickey Harris: Starting Aug. 1, those who want to use *WLN* articles in a training manual can do so without paying reprint charges and requesting permission. The newsletter will regularly carry this notice to save people time and expense. *WLN* continues to be interested in submissions, particularly articles on high school writing centers and computers in the center. According to Mickey Harris, last year's price increase helped considerably and should keep the finances in good shape for a long while. Regional conference announcements should be sent to the newsletter 45 days in advance of the month the notice should appear. Harris welcomes comments and suggestions that will keep the newsletter a collaborative effort.
- b. *The Writing Center Journal*. Diana George announced that the spring issue, featuring a number of articles on ESL, was ready for mailing. She also indicated that the establishment of the permanent editorial board would provide tenure and consistency to the journal after the current editors move on.
- c. NCTE Workshop—1993. Ray Wallace indicated that the workshop would focus on high school/college connections and said he was still soliciting presenters.
- d. CCCC Presentation—1994. Byron Stay is soliciting ideas for the theme for the special interest session.
- e. WCenter. Lady Falls Brown, who created *WCenter* two years ago, reported that the on-line conference was quite

active. Some of the discussions have transferred to other networks, including MBU and WPA.

- f. Committee Reports. The ESL committee reported that there will be a conference on ESL issues in May. The board decided to change the standing committee structure to a list of resource people and to make a stronger effort to publicize the availability of these resource people.

New Business

- a. Scholarship Awards. The president announced that the winners of this year's writing center scholarship award were Anne DiPardo for her *WCJ* article, "Whispers of Coming and Going": Lessons from Fannie" and Meg Woolbright for her *WCJ* article, "The Politics of Tutoring: Feminism Within the Patriarchy."
- b. NWCA Conference. Byron Stay introduced the idea of a national NWCA conference and solicited feedback on the issues of form, locale, date, and impact. The need for a national identity and the opportunity for interaction to define issues was strongly supported. Members debated issues regarding conference planning, particularly the impact that a national conference would have on regional identity. The board decided to investigate the possibility of coordinating a national conference in conjunction with a regional conference each year. A motion to establish a committee for a 1994 conference, headed by Byron Stay and Ray Wallace, was approved.
- c. NWCA Breakfast. The board discussed the possibility of having a breakfast at the national conference as a time for informal sharing, similar to the WPA breakfast but not at the same time. A motion was approved to explore the possibility of a

Friday morning breakfast in Nashville. Kirsten Benson volunteered to look into it.

d. Proposal Reviewers. The board discussed the importance of having a strong representation of writing center people as proposal reviewers for CCCC. Pat Dyer encouraged members to volunteer for this responsibility. Members also questioned why the 1994 CCCC proposal form listed writing centers under administrative issues. A motion was approved to have Lady Falls Brown contact Jackie Jones Royster to discuss the relationship with NCTE, including the room size for our meetings and the proposal call.

e. Nominations for Board Positions. The board is soliciting nominations for board positions. A ballot will be sent to the membership in mid-May.

f. CCCC Proposal—Area Cluster. Discussed above.

g. Scheduling Board Meetings. Members discussed their preference for meeting times. The general consensus was that morning meetings are preferable to evening. There was agreement to not change the time for the NCTE meeting.

Announcements

News from the Regional Associations:

- Southeastern is moving to a fall conference with Jackie Jones Royster as speaker.
- South Central will meet April 15-16 in Stillwater, OK with Jeanne Simpson as keynoter.
- MidAtlantic will meet at Villanova on April 24. Elaine Maimon will speak.
- Rocky Mountain will meet in Denver Oct. 14-16 with the Rocky Mountain MLA.
- New England will meet April 17 with Mickey Harris as keynoter.

• East Central met in March with Jim Berlin and Jeanne Simpson as speakers.

• Midwest will meet in St. Louis in October with Lil Brannon as speaker.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:05 a.m.

*Respectfully submitted,
Nancy Grimm
NWCA Executive Secretary*

THE WRITING LAB

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