

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 18, Number 2

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

October, 1993

...FROM THE EDITOR...

In this month's issue of the newsletter you'll find a variety of articles discussing our interaction with administrators, teachers, and students. These essays remind us of the diversity of a typical day in a writing lab: sending reports to administrators, writing memos to or meeting with teachers, collaborating with students, developing handouts for our cabinets of instructional resources, and reflecting on our work. This is a useful overview of how diverse our responsibilities are as directors and tutors and how many different groups we interact with.

Yet, there is another interaction we discuss only infrequently—the support system that exists within each writing center among the staff. We share anecdotes and offer each other strategies and suggestions as we chat between and after tutorials, we commiserate after difficult or challenging sessions, we bolster the confidence of new tutors, we respond to each other's writing, and we congratulate each other after a particularly successful tutorial.

There is clearly a support network within and between writing centers that is a defining feature of what we are. It's there between the lines in the electronic conversations on WCenter and at conferences as well, and it's a topic that needs to be explored in more depth and from a variety of perspectives. Care to offer your insights on all this?

• Muriel Harris, editor

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The burden of proof: Demonstrating the effectiveness of a computer writing center program

Does this scenario sound familiar? A group of teachers, concerned about the quality of their students' writing and excited about the possibilities of using computer technology in writing instruction, spend weeks, months, even years developing a new program in writing—a writing center which uses computers. A committee of experienced teachers researches student needs; interested colleagues spend hours in conference workshops and visitations to schools with similar yet always intrinsically different programs; another committee pores through articles and books on pedagogy and endlessly debates the minutiae of the project in what seem like interminable after-school caucuses; the committees finally assemble to identify specific goals and draft the plans for a program to implement them.

Never mind dealing with textbook selection and the garnering of support material, much of which does not exist and must be created. Never mind finding the money, which may involve researching and writing grant proposals. Never mind juggling staff requirements and scheduling and burdening colleagues in your department who don't re-

ally see the need for any change, thank you. Never mind dealing with public relations and administrators and disgruntled teachers from other departments who feel compelled to put in their two cents' worth. Perseverance is the rule. The program is born. And somehow the kind of results all those committees hoped for, that the research said was possible, slowly begins to appear—student writing skills improve.

But, lo and behold, now the fun begins. Now the program must prove that it works. A recessionary atmosphere demands that programs become accountable and will not permit the luxury of time to let the program find its legs. It's not enough anymore for a group of experienced professionals to state that they are confident that the program is working, that their students' knowledge of writing and revision skills have increased. Cold, hard proof is required—the kind of proof that can stand up to any principal, school board member, or concerned local citizen. But the gathering of proof becomes

a task of Sisyphean proportions tacked onto the daily burdens of teaching in a secondary school. We're not talking controlled studies and graduate assistants here. We're talking adding yet another task to the already burdened high school English teacher. And don't forget, all that emphasis on writing has just increased the paper load of every teacher in the department.

Elizabeth Ackley addresses part of this problem in her essay on how to supervise a high school writing center:

An innovative program such as the secondary school writing center seldom wins instant or universal approval among teachers and administrators. "New" to some teachers seems synonymous with "fad," "ephemeral," or even "irresponsible" in this current buzz word decade of "back to basics." I can only say, "Avoid confrontation, run the program as effectively as possible, and have faith that the program itself will eventually quell the criticism." (90-91)

Ackley offers useful advice, based on experience and common sense. But this practical advice is rarely enough in tough economic times. School districts hampered by restrictive budgets are often unwilling to "have faith" and require more evidence than efficient operation and daily head counts of students the using the lab. Ackley's response leaves still another problem, one addressed by Stephen North:

Writing centers . . . have grown up in reaction to a widespread dissatisfaction with the classroom teaching of writing. The speed of this growth, unfortunately, has enabled writing center staffs to do little more than survive, to do what they can to improve the lot of writers in their charge, leaving precious little time, money or energy for research into the hows and whys of their operations. (25)

School district administrators aren't the only ones who need to have faith. Implementing an innovative program like a writing center that uses computers to teach writing requires risk and a willingness to experiment. It demands a strong commitment to North's belief:

All writing centers . . . rest on this single theoretical foundation: that the ideal situation for teaching and learning writing is the tutorial, . . . and that the object of this interaction is to intervene in

and ultimately alter the composing process of the writer. (28)

Implementing a writing center that uses computers in the teaching of writing exacts an even stronger commitment to the belief that this "intervention" and "alteration" can be aided by word processing technology.

We are left then with two basic concerns: how can we assess and define the success we've experienced in our computer writing program and how do we prove it in order to guarantee continued support from administrators, school boards, and fellow teachers?

Few pedagogical theorists offer solutions practical enough for implementation in the day-to-day operation of a computer writing center. Research options such as protocol analysis in which students tape their thoughts aloud while going through the composition process are totally impractical on the secondary school level. Writing analyses based on syntactic maturity are processes often outside the ken of a standard high school English teacher. More practical solutions, such as the one offered by Raymond Rodrigues, seem to offer a glimmer of hope:

Inquiry-based evaluation involves the participants in designing their own questions about their teaching and seeking their own answers. . . . if teachers can be allowed and encouraged to ask their own questions as informal researchers, then the evaluation itself will evolve from the results of that informal research. (272-273)

But is this informal research enough? Is it acceptable to administrators who require more stringent proofs in order to continue funding? In the absence of a state-mandated writing assessment program, local districts are left to wrestle with the problem of providing their own criteria for a successful writing program or to trust the judgment of their teachers. Rodrigues' system takes some of the burden away from teachers and metes it out equally to administrators, educational theorists, and teachers: "An inquiry-based evaluation system assumes a partnership of all participants. Teachers in both public schools and universities, are, first and foremost, to be treated as professional colleagues" (273-74). But this is a big assumption. It implies that it is possible for teachers to be perceived as equal partners with administrators, university professors, and researchers.

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Secondary school teachers rarely have been encouraged to put forth the evidence of their own experience as proof that a program works. Administrators are often quick to respond to public pressure and search for ways to validate a program's success through comparison with research models or standardized test performance, going to great lengths to avoid substantiating results with those most involved—the teachers. And public school teachers are their own worst enemies. Intimidated by the pedagogical research they read in between grading piles of papers, teachers fail to realize that they know what works with their students and that they can articulate their successes. They fail to realize that what is so apparent to them can be demonstrated to others by providing annotated writing samples of their students' work.

It is obvious that this system has several drawbacks, not the least of which is the further burdening of the teacher. But the nature of word processing itself can offer clear proof that improvements in writing have taken place if the teachers involved in gathering those proofs take advantage of the technology to indicate that they are able to "intervene in and ultimately alter the composing process of the writer" (North 28). Printing successive drafts of student writing composed on the computer demonstrates that intriguing and often invaluable changes occur in the interaction between student, teacher, and machine. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the revision stages of writing.

The revision stage of writing is one which constantly proves irksome to students, even when they compose on a word processor. They are quite content to proofread a paper and look for surface errors in spelling and punctuation, but they are often loath to revise for sentence structure, focus and organization. A teacher can exploit the capabilities of a word processor to illustrate the need for more extensive revisions. The results of this "intervention" and "alteration" can then be demonstrated by printing successive drafts on the computer.

Joan, a senior, was sent back to the writing center to revise what she thought was her finished essay on imagery patterns in *Macbeth*. She had composed the paper in the center as part of a class writing project. She returned to the center when her teacher indicated to her that her paper was unacceptable in its present form. Joan was willing to

attempt revision but unable to see just what was wrong with her essay.

I showed Joan how to use the word processor to isolate the thesis statement and topic sentences of each paragraph and copy them in order at the end of the file. Joan's original thesis and topic sentences looked like this:

Another imagery pattern that plays an important part in the overall meaning of *Macbeth* is the idea of sleep and death, Shakespeare uses this imagery pattern to bring out a few significant ideas in the play. [comma fault]

The first idea that Shakespeare attempts to present is how the sleep/death imagery pattern shows Macbeth's true inner thoughts and feelings.

A second idea that Shakespeare considers sleep to be a lesser form of death with similar qualities. [sentence fragment]

A final idea about the sleep/death imagery is how sleep leads to death.

Throughout *Macbeth* Shakespeare uses the sleep/death imagery pattern to show the various relationship between the two and how they affect the characters.

It became obvious to Joan that she needed to revise for sentence structure and variety, clarity and transitions. She ended up revising much of her "finished" essay. Printing the draft at this point and printing the final draft later clearly illustrated to her the significance of intervention and the value of using the word processor in revision.

There is an added bonus to this procedure. In the average high school, students often resist the stages of the writing process. According to Susan Monroe Nugent, some students "view procedures such as freewriting, heuristics, and peer critiquing as busy work, only completing them to please the teacher. They discover no value in them and see no reason to accept them" (21). This is essentially a problem of perception—students fail to work at these procedures because they fail to see how these activities influence their writing. Printing successive drafts clearly demonstrates to the students as well as to any skeptical administrator the efficacy of the writing process.

It would be a simple matter for the teacher involved in preparing these proofs to attach a brief explanation of the assignment and comment on the student's progress. Printouts of successive drafts of student writing do speak for themselves, but annotated samples of stu-

dent writings prepared by the teacher demonstrate another aspect of a program's effectiveness. Careful explanation of the nature and expectations of the assignment on the part of the teacher have that added advantage of illustrating some of the goals of the program itself.

Providing administrators, school boards, and skeptics with annotated samples of student writing may not be the only way to alleviate the burden of proof, but it is practical, accessible and has the added advantage of supporting the process of inquiry into the success of a writing program. If we continually examine student writings as potential proofs of a program's effectiveness, we force ourselves to continually assess the results of our own efforts in instituting and running such a program.

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WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Telling stories in and out of school

At the last Conference on College Composition and Communication, I delivered a paper on "Dependency in the Writing Center," opening my talk with two anecdotes about students who had come into the Writers' Workshop during the course of the previous year. One of these students, whom I'll call Kwan, was notable—and memorable—in that she had visited the Workshop seventy-two times in a single semester. She had, at one time or another, worked with all seventeen tutors in the center, and her dissertation on the medieval Chinese concubinage system became an occasional topic of conversation at our regular tutor meetings. The small gasp of surprise I heard when telling Kwan's story at the conference showed me that I had grasped my audience's attention, and the story itself served as a nice intro to the "meatier" discussion of psychological dependency that made up the bulk of my paper.

I thought nothing about telling this anecdote. People in composition studies often make use of personal anecdotes to illustrate or exemplify the general issues they wish to discuss, and people who work in and write about writing centers do so, perhaps, more often than most. We interact closely, individually, and personally with students; in some respects, anecdotes are what we DO. How can we NOT refer to our private experiences in public forums when they make up so much a part of our daily lives, not to mention research? Personal stories add color and warmth and life to our work; they remind us that we are dealing with real people in authentic circumstances, not just "subjects" that we scrutinize and report on collectively.

I had no qualms about publishing my paper as a journal article either, a means by which the anecdote about Kwan will soon reach an even wider audience. I see such stories all the time in the literature of our profession. There is usually no indication that the authors have asked permission to tell stories about the "interesting" students they have seen or conferences they have been in, and the students' real names are always changed so that no one, presumably, will know who they are. For the most part, we

assume that this is a sufficient safeguard for our students' privacy, but I wonder whether this assumption is merely a convenient and expedient fiction for us. Is "changing the name to protect the innocent/guilty" all we have to do? Why should we assume that no one we talk to will know who the anecdotal student REALLY is? How much detail in our anecdotes is too much detail? To what extent must we balance our mandate to protect student confidentiality with our concomitant need to report our observations to others in the profession? If knowledge-making based on personal experience (which Stephen North refers to as "lore") is a significant feature of writing center work and research, then how are we to share that knowledge ethically? The issue of confidentiality, as I have indicated in previous columns, is perhaps the single most ethically troublesome issue for anyone who works in writing centers. Deciding what information to keep private and what to share with others is rarely easy and sometimes exceptionally difficult. What we need to ask ourselves, I think, is to what degree we are willing to maintain a hard line about sharing tutorial information with "outsiders," be they administrators or faculty members or other students, and willing, at the same time, to maintain a somewhat softer ethical line with "insiders" such as our colleagues or interested audiences.

The significance of this issue came home to me just a few months ago in a rather unexpected way. This summer, as in past summers, my colleagues and I in the Center for Writing Studies conducted a week-long writing-across-the-curriculum seminar for faculty at the university. Faculty from all parts of campus attended, and one of our sessions was devoted to writing center issues—who works there, what we do, how we work with graduate students, and how we tutor undergraduates from a wide variety of disciplines. Several of my tutors and I talked about these matters and other topics of concern to the faculty in attendance, most of whom were still trying to understand what "writing process" and "conferencing" were all about. During the course of our presentation, we

had occasion to talk about Kwan and her experience in the writing center, mostly as a way of illustrating how the center was not just for undergraduates or remedial students but for graduate students as well. In the ensuing discussion, it quickly became evident that one of the faculty members in the audience knew who Kwan was. I flinched a bit when I realized that Kwan's privacy had been unintentionally violated, and I flinched a lot more when a different faculty member approached me at the break and asked if it was ethical to have referred to Kwan in our presentation.

I admitted to him that it probably wasn't. If I had stopped to think about it, I should have realized that with faculty members coming to the seminar from all parts of campus, it was likely that someone from Kwan's department would be attending, and it was equally likely that the person would be familiar with the work of several graduate students, possibly including Kwan. By mentioning Kwan's dissertation topic in this faculty member's presence, I identified her as surely as if I'd called her by her real name. True, the writing-across-the-curriculum seminar was a forum where the chances of someone knowing Kwan were somewhat higher than usual, but I question whether, ethically, that should make any difference.

We will never be able to say with 100% certainty that no one who reads what we've written or hears what we have to say will know—and potentially be able to identify—the people we refer to in our anecdotes. While we want to be as accurate and informative and detailed as we possibly can when reporting the results of our work or research in the writing center, we have to weigh those goals against the conflicting need to protect our students' privacy whenever possible. So where does that leave us, then? What sorts of rules or guidelines (if any) can we apply? I will return to these questions in my next column.

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Explaining and justifying writing centers: One MORE example

Readers will no doubt recognize that the title of my essay derives from Cornelius Cosgrove's article in the April 1993 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, in which the author, Freshman English Coordinator and supervisor of the writing center at Slippery Rock University, meticulously plumbs his own rhetorical situation: 1) exigency, the need to address "expectation conflict" and to deconstruct the widely held misconception of writing centers as sub-skills based, remedial fix-it shops; 2) purpose, the necessity to explain and justify "both the role and value" (Cosgrove 1) of writing centers; and 3) audience, primarily English colleagues who read the department's newsletter in which Cosgrove's justification was originally circulated.

Deja vu would be an apt description of my immediate response to Cosgrove's article. As director of California University of Pennsylvania's writing center, I too had composed and circulated to colleagues a document that attempted to explain and justify the role and function of our writing center. Cosgrove's and my rhetorical situation within our respective institutions appeared remarkably similar: exigency in both cases sprang out of the need to battle expectation conflict, as well as the need to subvert the "prevailing view of knowledge" (Cosgrove 2) that can generate the confining metaphors of the prison, the hospital, and the madhouse (Pemberton) that so often restrict writing centers, and the need to defend collaborative and social constructionist pedagogical theories that inform most writing center practice. In the brief time I spent reading the article, I began to wonder how many writing center directors had not found it necessary to "re-open dialogue" (Cosgrove 2) with their own colleagues.

Interestingly, a new (or old?) rhetorical situation imposes itself, mandating the composition of yet another document that attempts to explain and justify the role and value of writing centers. In this case, exigency stems from the steadily declining state and federal funding of higher education, while the purpose shapes up as convincing

the institution to continue to underwrite operational expenses of the writing center. The audience, of course, consists of administrators who will assess the overall value and contribution of the program and its cost in relation to other programs.

In Pennsylvania as in other states, the level of educational funding is widely described to be "in crisis." In the fourteen-university state system of which both California University and Slippery Rock are part, individual institutions have reported projected budgetary deficits ranging from 1.2 million to 10 million dollars. The question that has reared its ugly head is how much will the money crunch affect student-service agencies such as the writing center?

That money problems do pose clear and imminent dangers for writing centers is self-evident. However, according to Peggy Jolly, "the source and amount of funding apportioned for tutorial support often depend more on the priority of the program than on its cost" (103). Thus the main rhetorical imperative for writing center directors may consist more of establishing our place within the mission of the whole university than of explaining ourselves to our English colleagues.

In the document presented below (sans its original introduction and conclusion), I examine our writing center's "expanded roles/expanded responsibilities" (George and Grimm) in an attempt to convince the administration of our overall value, and thus our cost-effectiveness. I do this by discussing three prominent roles the writing center plays within the context of our entire university community, including students, faculty and bean counters. Drafted at the suggestion of our department chair, the document was included in the most recent Writing Center Annual Report, copies of which go directly to the Dean of Liberal Arts and the Vice-president for Academic Affairs.

Like Cosgrove, I do not recommend my text as a "model" for writing center directors, but I do propose it as a strategy for deflecting

the harmful effects of the inevitable budget decreases that many of us face.

The role of the writing center in student retention

Let me begin by presenting the statistics: since Fall semester 1989, up to and including the last Fall semester, the Writing Center has tutored 7,867 California University of Pennsylvania students. These students come from all three colleges and represent nearly every major and course of study that CUP offers. They range from first-semester freshmen to Master's Degree students writing their research theses (this statistic does not include faculty contacts and consultation, which will be discussed in a later section of this report).

Although I have not attempted the daunting task of applying statistical operations in order to scientifically measure the total number of tutorials to determine the significance of our impact on student retention, I feel it safe to conclude that the writing center has positively affected the retention rate. In any event, I agree with Jeanne Simpson, who notes that the complexity of defining and measuring student retention often invites misunderstanding. If retention means, as Simpson declares, "students' persistence in an institution" (102) rather than the raw percentage of the total who matriculate, then the sheer number of repeat tutorials we conduct (approx. 50%) is evidence of our helping students persevere in their academic pursuits.

Institutional politics notwithstanding, writing centers "are not just about writing, they are about student success" (Simpson 106). This means success for the general student population, but perhaps more importantly, it means success for at-risk, marginalized students. For instance, here at CUP the writing center has maintained a successful working relationship with CARE, our highly touted academic survival program for learning disabled and seriously underprepared students. During our five-year partnership, we have supplied CARE with approximately 1,200 hours of tutorial assistance, making one of our specially selected tutors a regular member of the CARE staff.

If we accept Curtis Ricker's definition of the educationally disadvantaged student as one who meets one or more of certain conditions, including low achievement, academic under-preparation, cultural and linguistic isolation, and poverty (264), then I think it unlikely that I can overestimate the role that the Writing Center plays in the retention of the many educationally disadvantaged students who attend our university, including the few in CARE and the many outside of it. According to Ricker, "working to increase the survival of disadvantaged students [is becoming] increasingly important in American education" (265). Since much of this work must focus on literacy, especially writing, then Simpson's declaration about writing centers and retention being a "natural combination" (108) takes on added significance.

The role of the writing center in professional development

"Our position," write Jay Jacoby and Stan Patten, "is based on the fact that service in a writing center is the best possible method of professional development in writing instruction" (158). My position, identical to these writers', is corroborated in a study conducted by Robert Child of Purdue University. Child used two comparison groups of classroom English teachers, one group who had received training and experience in a writing center before becoming classroom teachers, and a second group of experienced teachers who had returned to the classroom after receiving similar training and experience. Child found that for both groups, writing center experience had "informed," and in some cases, "transformed" their classroom teaching. Both veteran and first-year teachers were better able to use conferencing strategies to advantage, were less authoritarian in presenting material and posing questions, and were more adept at employing effective modeling and collaborative group practices.

Here at CUP we have sent a number of former tutors off to language arts, secondary, and college classrooms as teachers of writing. Anecdotal testimony from these new teachers indicates that their writing center experience proved to be a major factor in their getting hired in an extremely tight job market. This comes as no surprise. To begin with, our tutors attend fifteen one-hour training seminars per semester, where they learn about conferencing strategies, writing assignment design, and techniques of responding to student writing. Moreover, as Annette Rottenberg reports, "[t]utors learn at first hand about the anxieties of the student

writer (which may not always be visible in the structured environment of the classroom), about the evolution of process to product, and about the relationship of author to critic" (11).

However important our tutor training program and the tutoring experience itself might be to CUP's prospective teachers, our tutors do more than conference with students and discuss and write about theory and pedagogy. As far as I know, the Writing Center is the only apprentice site on campus where students can actually learn the teaching profession by practicing it, where education majors can take advantage of an opportunity to make the difficult transition from student to working professional. Perhaps more impor-

The main rhetorical imperative for writing center directors may consist more of establishing our place within the mission of the whole university than of explaining ourselves to our English colleagues.

tantly, the Writing Center provides tutors an opportunity to engage in research and scholarship. For example, over the past two years, several tutors along with the Writing Center Director have developed and presented three outreach workshops: (1) "A Spelling Workshop for Dysfunctional Spellers"; (2) "Mastering the In-class Essay"; and (3) "An Overview for Writers of Graduate Theses."

Even more beneficial perhaps for our tutoring staff was the opportunity to discuss with professional audiences the design and implementation of our workshops in two seventy-five minute panel presentations, one at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing and the other at the 1992 Alliance of California University and Western Pennsylvania English Teachers Conference. To my mind, the kinds of experiences provided to the tutors in the Writing Center are invaluable: opportunities to DO teaching, research and scholarship.

The role of the writing center in writing across the curriculum

Although CUP has not instituted any formal WAC program, our graduation requirement for "writing component courses" and our impending revision of the General Education Program testify to our conviction that expanded literacy, particularly writing,

is integral to successful education. And numerous educators have promoted the writing center as the hub of any broad-based, campus-wide writing program (e.g., George and Grimm).

While it would be an exaggeration to claim such an expanded role for CUP's writing center, nevertheless, certain of our normal practices demonstrate our important contribution to the teaching of writing across the disciplines. First and foremost I would cite our diverse tutorial work with students and faculty from across the entire university community. Approximately 40% of our clients are non-English majors working on research papers, analytical investigations, scientific and technical reports, traditional academic essays, etc. Importantly, in our work with these students we endeavor to teach not only general rhetorical principles, such as concern for purpose, audience, organization/development, and standards of correctness, but also discipline-specific rhetorical principles, such as the format, language, and tone appropriate for a chemistry lab report, a teacher observation, or sundry other diverse types of texts.

Furthermore, we maintain constant contact with both English and non-English faculty through the issuance of our "Tutorial Report" forms. By distributing these forms to faculty, we not only keep them informed about the writing progress of their students, but also we articulate for them important principles brought to light by composition and linguistic research and rhetorical theory: the psycholinguistics of writing processes, for one example, or the connection between grammatical theory and writing competence, for another.

Moreover, as Director of the Writing Center, I take full advantage of the opportunity to communicate with faculty about theory and research in the field of composition, often corresponding directly with them concerning the special tutorial arrangement made between me and certain of their students whom they have recommended for intensive remedial instruction. Numerous faculty have expressed appreciation for the lengthy memos I have sent them, adding that these communications gave them a better understanding of their students' writing strengths and weaknesses.

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The alliance for computers and writing

At the 4Cs in San Diego, several of us began talking about an Alliance for Computers and Writing (though we didn't use that name, then). Through e-mail, we created a group discussion about the idea and were able to set up a face-to-face meeting at the Computers and Writing Conference in Ann Arbor in May, 1993. At that meeting, we made the formal decision to create the Alliance. We plan to "open for business" in January, 1994, but, in the meantime, we are doing many things to get prepared for the grand opening, one of which is connecting to ongoing activities such as the *Writing Lab Newsletter*.

The Alliance is based at three universities: Gallaudet University in Washington, DC; George Mason University in Fairfax, VA; and Texas Tech in Lubbock. I am director and John O'Connor at George Mason and Fred Kemp at Texas Tech are co-directors. Cindy Selfe and Gail Hawisher are co-chairing our Board of Directors.

The goal of the Alliance is to advance the use of computers to teach writing at all levels of education, K-12 and college. We will do that by creating, essentially, a professional association for the field of computers and writing. This will be a loose association, however, building on all the organizations already in existence, not supplanting them. In keeping with this scheme, we're looking to identify contact people and regional leaders, usually those people who are already serving as such.

If you are interested in the Alliance, please let us know. By "interested," I mean interested in further information, joining, becoming a contact person, or anything else related to the Alliance. E-mail is <twatson@gallua.bitnet>; phone 202-651-5494; address: Trent Batson, HMB, Gallaudet University, Washington, DC 20002.

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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 4: CUNY Writing Centers Association, in Brooklyn, NY
Contact: Lucille Nieporent, English Skills Center, Kingsborough Community College—CUNY, 2001 Oriental Blvd., Brooklyn, NY 11235 (718-368-5405) or Steven Serafin (212-772-4212).
- March 5: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Baltimore, MD
Contact: Tom Bateman, 3708 Chestnut Ave., Baltimore, MD
- March 5: New England Writing Centers Association, in Andover, MA
Contact: Kathleen Shine Cain, Writing Center, Merrimack College, North Andover, MA 01845
- 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).

VOICES FROM THE NET

Sharing records: Student confidentiality and faculty relations

Conversations take interesting turns when allowed to run their course unfettered. During the summer, Kim Jackson posted a note to WCENTER* asking what appeared to be a simple question, a matter of administrative routine: How long should writing center records be kept? As is common on WCENTER, a number of people reported their own practices and offered Kim advice. Nice.

Soon, however, the conversation turned from keeping records to the pricklier subject of the advisability and ethics of sharing student records, especially with faculty. This shift in topic reflects a continuing concern among writing center specialists about their roles in their institutions and their relationships with other players in the institutional game. It's a subject we come to often during our conversations, online or off. This particular discussion represents one of a number of possible perspectives on it, but one with very tangible stakes involved.

This discussion thread lasted for two full weeks. Assuming that the level of interest shown by the writing center specialists who are online may reflect similar interests in the greater writing center community, we will stretch the excerpts from this discussion over two issues.

Thursday, 1 July 1993
From: Kim Jackson

I'm looking for some advice about keeping records. What I mean is the forms that students and tutors fill out about sessions. We have several drawers full of names, id numbers, and sessions notes. How long do some of you save this material? Someone mentioned to me that I might need to keep it for auditing purposes since we get some federal/state funding. I do know that annual reports are written—I'm in the process of doing my first one—but how long do we need to keep the documentation that is the source of the numbers and comments? All comments welcome!

Wednesday, 7 July
From: Joan Mullin

I'm sure others will have loads of suggestions, and I'll add mine. We've tinkered with our tutor report forms for years and finally (left to collaboration) we came up with one that we like; we've also found it to be a sneaky way to inform faculty of our vocabulary. On the top of the form is the student's name, phone #, class and teacher for which the paper's due, date and time spent in the center for the one visit. [...] On the right the tutors expand on what they've checked off on the left. Seems you could keep your check list, and expand it with a comments section too! We've gained valuable information with this system, and faculty from other disciplines (even English) have written back to us using the vocabulary from the form—it's like we begin to speak the same language!

Wednesday, 7 July
From: Susan Callaway

Joan's response about her forms got me thinking (again) about the extent to which we all communicate with faculty about just what goes on in the writing center, particularly with their students. I am all for educating faculty about our work, but I find that I am incredibly protective of exactly what goes on in the session. In other words, I want to protect the privacy of what goes on between tutor and student writer (to a certain extent) and thus what happens to any written narratives.

What do others think about informing the instructors either that their students came to see tutors or exactly what the sessions entailed? I'd hate to screw up any support for the center that could come from word traveling around from teacher to teacher, but I do want to protect the student's privacy.

I'm starting to be bothered by our forms that are in triplicate. . .

Thursday, 8 July
From: Valerie Balester

My mind is on record keeping tonight. I wonder how many of you, like Joan, send a report to faculty after a student visit? We don't, and the main reason is that it's a lot of work—even just putting reports in mail boxes—and we have very little support staff, if any.

Another reason, that I often waffle over, is that it may interfere with our relationship with a student—it may violate her privacy or it may set us up as a support for a class rather than as, as North puts it in the ever-omnipresent "Idea of a Writing Center," a support for STUDENTS! Ideas? Comments?

Thursday, 8 July
From: Dave Healy

I'd say it's nobody's business who in particular uses the writing center. Any data that administrators or faculty want can be reported in aggregate form, e.g., so many students from freshman comp. or from a given section of a given course, so many graduate students or undergraduates, so many Pisces or Capricorns, etc. We have to keep track of numbers to justify our existence, but we owe our clients some confidentiality. By the bye, Michael Pemberton's column in the May and June issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* has an interesting discussion of confidentiality in the center.

Thursday, 8 July
From: Lady Brown

When a student comes to the center, we prepare a folder which contains two sheets—the first gathers data about the student. . . . On the second page. . . we ask the student to describe what transpired. These folders are available to the instructors so that they can see what took place during a tutorial and who worked with a particular student. Occasionally, an instructor will come by to look at a folder. Not many do.

We do not send a description of tutorials to instructors. In the past couple of years, however, as a good-will gesture, I began sending a note at the end of each week to each instructor listing the names of his/her student(s), and we encourage the instructor to check with us if he/she has any questions. Instructors seem to like knowing a student has come to the center. The note may predispose the instructor to view the student a bit more sympathetically.

Anyway, if you are uncomfortable sending too descriptive a message, you might try a note just citing the students who do come.

Thursday, 8 July
From: Kim Jackson

Here. . . we also do not send a report to the teachers. Part of the reason is administrative—not enough help to do it. And I'm also cynical—I'm [not sure] many of them would [have the time] to read them. [. . .]

In any case, here's how we handle the issue. If a student wants the instructor to know she visited us, we offer to make her a copy of the report to attach to her paper. If an instructor wants to know about certain students visiting us, she can call us and we can confirm over the phone by checking the computer. If she wants to know more, she can visit us and check the folder. I figure the latter is a sneaky way of getting instructors to visit us to get a sense of what is going on. Many never see any other area but their office and their classroom.

Thursday, 8 July
From: Jean Ann Cantore

I, too, am of the opinion that a writing center is a support service for students and, therefore, our "client" list should be kept confidential as much as possible. However, we have some engineering professors who are so interested in their students' doing well that they often insist these students come see us for help. When this situation occurs, we certainly have no problem telling these professors that, "yes, so and so did come by for help." In fact, one professor (one of my favorites and certainly one of our biggest champions) even brings students over and introduces them to us personally! His interest in their well being is refreshing, yet a bit rare.

Unfortunately, we certainly have our share of professors who try to implicate us in their

grading, which has created some problems for us. They often put us in the middle, between them and their students saying, "whatever they think, I'll agree with." (We generally decline the chance to be "experts" in this situation.)

We wouldn't be here without our engineering faculty, but it's hard being between a rock and a hard place sometimes.

Thursday, 8 July
From: Joan Mullin

I know what a controversy "reporting" to faculty can be. I think the extent of the reportage depends on the community, quite frankly. We did not start out with this kind of reporting at all, but for reasons too long to list I would never abandon the practice here. Our files ARE confidential—the only way tutor reports go back to faculty is if students check a little box that gives us permission to send them. Their reports are open to them; tutors will often use the previous reports to start a tutorial (e.g., O.K., last time you ****. Did you want to look at your revision?), by sharing them with the students. International students may have great difficulty with the idea of any report (if they come from explosive political environments) and we protect them, give explanations, explain the system of records here; ultimately they can refuse to have them sent to their instructors. This quarter 73% of the students asked that they be sent.

Their instructors value their students' work in the center and they know that. Our reports have drawn faculty to the center in many ways—they call to give us compliments, ask how we succeeded—it's pretty positive. Reports have also unmasked controversy—we had real problems with the ESL division here. As a result of the reports—they found out we weren't writing students' papers (though they didn't quite believe we could do so well with their students until we had an in-service with them—exchanging pedagogy).

The staff here spends a LOT of time talking about how to write reports. Our main concern is never to betray the students. (No tutor would write "So-and-So came in complaining about his 'jerk of a teacher'; it was impossible to accomplish anything because so-and-so thinks the paper topic is stupid.") That's an extreme example, but you get the point. Talking about writing reports also is a great in-service that leads to coping with the

university community, listening to the problem behind what the student may be writing or saying, evaluating your own affective attitude during a tutorial, etc.

It works for us. . .but, probably, not for all.

Thursday, 8 July
From: Joan Mullin

[. . .] We've invited faculty in because we need to know more about their requirements, or we find that one tutor's forgotten how brilliant her strategy for teaching articles is, and ask her to share it, or tutors are getting a lot of engineering (electrical) papers and we need to discuss what we ought to know, or etc. We find it a great resource for our tutor discussions. [. . .] I guess in this context I learned—hard and early—that it doesn't help the students when I cut the Center off from the faculty (though some of you have heard it, I'll spare the others my Masada complex story).

Eric Crump
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO

** 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. As of August 24, there were 194 subscribers on the list. 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*. If you have problems, write to Fred Kemp at: YKFOK@TTACS.BITNET*

New England Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals
March 5, 1994
North Andover, MA
"Forging Connections"
Keynote speaker: Lil Brannon

Proposals are invited from teachers, directors, peer and professional tutors from high school and college writing centers. For information about topics and information to be included in proposals, contact Leone Scanlon, Chair, NEWCA Steering Committee, Writing Center, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610-1477. Deadline for proposals: November 8, 1993.

CUNY Writing Centers Association

March 4, 1994
Brooklyn, New York
"Critical Times—Critical Teaching"
Keynote speaker: Ira Shor

For information, contact the conference co-chairs: Lucille Nieporent, English Skills Center, Kingsborough Community College—CUNY, 2001 Oriental Blvd., Brooklyn, NY 11235 (708-368-5405) or Steven Serafin (212-772-4212).

Whew....

Those of us who spend time on WCENTER have been discussing the role of visual literacy, particularly its special role in writing centers. Because one aspect of visual literacy is the impact of visual presentation, I was hoping that the "new look" of the newsletter would help to improve our image among our colleagues. Christina Murphy notes that, along with a reminder of the value and high professionalism of our articles, and Joel Nydahl gives us evidence of the effect an improved public image has on the purse strings of administrators. The comments included here demonstrate this and also relieve some of my sense of apprehension as to your reactions to the "new" newsletter.

Let me add to the long list of compliments you have been receiving on the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. What a splendid achievement—not only in enhancing the aesthetics of the newsletter but also the much more sophisticated professional look. WLN is such a fine

periodical that is so relevant to all the work we do in writing centers, and now to have it look on the outside as it does on the inside. Congratulations!

Christina Murphy
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, TX

Just thought I'd let everyone know that the "new *Writing Lab Newsletter*" so impresses me that I've gotten the Dean to spring for a subscription for each of my tutors. And I'm going to use it as one of the texts in the tutor-training course I teach each spring term.

Joel Nydahl
Babson College
Babson Park, MA

Tutor Training Manual. By Penny Frankel and Kay Severns.

This 41-page manual, which focuses on conferencing strategies for faculty, staff and peer tutors, was written for the tutors at Deerfield High School, in Deerfield, Illinois, an award-winning high school writing center. The manual includes sections with titles such as the profile of the ideal tutor, notes on tutoring, strategies for the draftless, quick tips for revision, making praise powerful, seven myths about writing centers, and evaluation of tutor performance. The authors' other book, *Building a Writing Center: From Idea to Identity*, is also available:

Package: Book plus Manual \$17.50
Book only \$12.00
Manual only \$ 7.95
(Postage included)

Order from:
Writing Center Consultants
1490 West Fork
Lake Forest, IL 60045

TUTORS' COLUMN

Professional intimacy

As a Coe College writing consultant this past year, I've thought extensively about the development and sustaining of consultant-student relationships. Each consultant will inevitably employ her own personal style. In my conferences I have found myself trying to develop relationships that provide for familiarity, yet maintain my professional status. This familiar-professional relationship allows the student to become comfortable with me without feeling obligated to me beyond our professional partnership. As a working team, we can have honesty and sharing without threatening our professional responsibilities.

A case study illustrating my point might prove helpful. During this past term I have had a series of writing conferences with "Marie," a sophomore majoring in sociology. Previous to my appointments with her, she and I were not acquainted, so our first conferences required some introductions. For that first session Marie brought in a paper, written for a composition class, which reconsidered the friendships she had made in college. Her essay expressed some fears that those friendships might end with graduation. Although Marie and I had never formally met, our conference soon resulted in a discussion of some rather personal aspects of her paper.

I have consulted with Marie several times since then, and I believe our success as a team depends on our "working relationship." Marie and I, despite our sometimes intimate and confidential discussions, have created not a personal, but a "familiar-professional" relationship. Realizing that each consultant discovers her own style and voice in her conferences, I recognize mine as a familiar-professional tone. While other writing center consultants may seek to cultivate personal friendships with their peers, my approach is different.

I like to make the student feel comfortable, but a personal intimacy in a relationship makes the actual consulting more compli-

cated. Conferences with my friends outside of the Writing Center sometimes seem more difficult because of the many personal feelings between the two of us. We can rarely look beyond our friendship to address the paper. In contrast, then, I try to develop, and subsequently sustain, familiarity between the student and myself; but I keep that familiarity on a professional level.

In my conferences with Marie, she discussed intimate thoughts and apprehensions, all under the broad umbrella of a writing conference. She understood, from my attitude and objective stance, that everything she told me was to help in producing a well-written paper. I took notes as she talked, and occasionally she would stop and write as well, realizing the importance or relevance of what she was saying. At no time, as far as I could perceive, did Marie feel our conversation had moved to a personal plane. I believe she felt comfortable with my attitude as a professional because it relieved her from the agonizing decision of *what* to tell me.

An important part of any partnership is trust, and as Marie continued to keep our weekly appointments, the familiarity between us grew. We became more comfortable with each other, but I do not believe either of us would say we have developed a "friendship." If I had tried to become too intimate, Marie might have been wary in divulging personal information about herself, even though it might have helped in the conference. I see Marie on campus and a hello follows her polite nod, but neither of us feels obligated to stop and chat; our relationship exists only within the boundaries of the Writing Center.

My relationship with the Writing Center Director is similar to this one. I have had conferences with him about several personal papers, yet when I speak to him outside of the Writing Center, I know he will not assume an uncomfortable familiarity. Professors who consult with students might not have this difficulty of maintaining student

trust, but as a peer of my clients, I can never ignore this potential problem. By keeping our working relationship on a professional level, most students will have no reason to doubt my confidentiality.

In my sessions with Marie, a professional approach enables me to understand her preferences; as a student, she also has a "style" that works for her, and my job is to be flexible in accommodating those needs. For example, most students prefer a little every-day chatter before beginning the session. The social mechanisms help them become more comfortable and ready for the conference. But Marie likes to get straight to work, preferring conferences that are direct and efficient. I have also learned what Marie likes to tackle first in the conferences, a knowledge which makes conducting the conference much easier. I can quickly sense where she would like a conference to head.

My experiences with Marie have helped me to formulate my self-concept as a writing consultant. As a professional, I must bend and be flexible. I must be prepared either to talk about last weekend's basketball game with one student or, for someone else, be a consultant who gets right to business. But the familiarity is also necessary because it breeds not contempt but a willingness to work. Marie often works on revisions of revisions, and our intimacy on a professional level, I believe, sometimes spurs her to continue working. Marie knows that I will remember last week's essay, and if she does not work on the paper, our familiarity in the conferences might make her feel, if not guilty, at least a little awkward. Marie does not feel obligated to work because of me, but I serve as one small, additional impetus for doing well.

The most rewarding aspect of a familiar-professional relationship, which I am sure almost all consultants can verify from successfully developing their own style, is the opportunity to see improvements in a student's writing. Because of my profes-

sional closeness with Marie, I can study her style as a writer without confusing it with Marie as a person. My relationship with her allows me to detect small improvements and gradual progress in her writing. We work as

a team, yet the members of our team remain detached from one another, allowing for unthreatened individuality. Marie has learned to trust and even like me as a consultant, as I trust and like her as a writer,

making for a strong foundation in our relationship.

Gail Brendel
Coe College
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Review

Literacy Online: The Promise (and Peril) of Reading and Writing with Computers. Ed. Myron Tuman. Pittsburgh and London: U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1992. 304 pp. (Cloth: \$34.95; Paper: \$14.95)

Over the past several years, many of us who work in writing centers have begun to incorporate computers into our teaching and tutoring, and despite the glitches that often accompany any new endeavor, most of us are excited about exploring the possibilities that the computer offers. Occasionally, though, some of us may feel a bit like Bilbo Baggins, the hero in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, who finds himself thrust suddenly into a strange adventure involving "mines and gold and troubles with the goblins and the depredation of dragons, and lots of other things which he did not understand." Initially out of his element and distinctly bewildered, the hobbit, nevertheless, chooses to participate. But he recognizes that his life will never be the same.

Like Bilbo, those of us who integrate computers into our teaching and tutoring recognize that the computer is going to change not only what we do in the writing center or classroom, but ultimately to alter established concepts of text and authorship. *Literacy On-line: The Promise (and Peril) of Reading and Writing with Computers*, edited by Myron Tuman is a collection of essays that examines these potential changes.

Originally presented at Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in 1989, as part of the Sixteenth Annual University of Alabama Symposium on English and American Literature, the essays in this collection invite the reader to become part of a conversation about how (not whether) computers will revolutionize our concept of literacy, raising the possibility that "literacy" will no longer accede to E.D. Hirsch's traditional definition, but rather include a completely new way of conceiving text and, possibly, with the inclusion of graphics, "a radical new way of organizing knowledge itself" (5). Although the essays vary in their subject matter, an overriding theme is that the concept of writing as the

linear arrangement of pure text is likely to change so as to include the use of graphics or even a non-linear series of artfully designed screens, and that the concept of individual authorship and intellectual property rights will be eroded, at least to some extent, by the accessibility of on-line libraries and easily expanded and interactive data bases. The essays are divided into five sections, each of which is followed by a discussion by Tuman, which provides a personal context to the discussion and alerts the reader to the issues being addressed.

The first section, "Computers and New Forms of Text," explores how the tremendous retrieval power of the computer will alter our concept of the unified completed text, and, by extension, our notion of text authorship and ownership. Jay David Bolter in "Literature in the Electronic Writing Space," argues that the introduction of electronic hypertext represents a watershed in our concept of reading, much as "the printing press established fixity of text leading to exacting textual criticism." Bolter maintains that the computer will create a notion of text as fluid and interactive, leading to a redefinition of what is meant by a book. No longer will books be viewed as the work of only one author—rather they will be recognized for what they have actually been all along—"an intertextuality of references to other books." Ted Nelson, in his essay, "Opening Hypertext: A Memoir," recounts his coining of the word "hypertext" in 1965 and his cataclysmic realization that reading need not be sequential, but rather, like thinking, can be a nonlinear process during which readers can move from one textual chunk to another, creating new relationships between them. Nelson postulates that computers will eventually enable readers to move freely though what he refers to as a giant "docuverse" and discusses his Xanadu project, a universal hypertext publishing system that he expects

will replace "five centuries of traditional book publishing and distribution."

Section two, "Computers and New Forms of Teaching English," examines the impact that computers are likely to have on our concept of literacy, and consequently, on how reading and writing will be presented in the classroom. In "Hypertext, Metatext, and the Electronic Canon," George Landow recounts the hypertext experience of one of his students as she examines various materials concerned with *Great Expectations*. Landow maintains that the computer will completely transform the nature of literary education, in that even novice readers will be able to create historical and thematic links that formerly only the most erudite could achieve. In "Dominion Everywhere," Helen Schwartz warns us that computer programs are not value free and that instead of enabling students to explore new ways of writing, some reinforce the conventional roles of the teacher and the student and can be quite limiting. Readability indexes, she points out, may be easy to implement, but are not especially useful in helping students learn either to read or write; similarly, a program such as "Writing is Thinking" recommends a particular sequence of writing that may not work for everyone.

Section three, "Computers and New Forms of Critical Thought" considers the extent to which computers facilitate our ability to think and act critically, both of which are considered necessary for human freedom. Stanley Aronowitz in "Looking Out: The Impact of Computers on the Lives of Professionals," looks at three work settings in which computers are used and questions whether increased technology results in a sacrifice in human contact. Gregory Ulmer, in "Grammatology (In the Stacks) of Hypermedia, a Simulation" writes a hypertext essay, simulating a trail through

the world of information about hypertext. Ulmer's essay makes it clear that new forms of text will require new methods of reading and writing.

Section four, "Computers and New Forms of Administrative Control," considers the extent to which the computer will result in greater administrative control of students as well as of the general population. Eugene Provenzo, in "The Electronic Panopticon: Censorship, Control, and Indoctrination in a Post-Typographic Culture," points out that the computer can be an agent of both surveillance and control. Victor Raskin, however, in "Naturalizing the Computer: English On-line," maintains that although the computer has the potential for increasing control and surveillance, it is no more dangerous than people, themselves, have always been.

Section five, "Computers and New Forms of Knowledge," examines the effect that new forms of text are likely to have on society. Richard Lanham, in "Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Practice, and Property," argues that the computer will enable ordinary users to exercise greater control of our culture's major symbols and will lead ultimately to the rebirth of rhetoric. Pamela McCorduck, in "How We Knew, How We Know, How We Will Know," points out that the concept of literacy in the future will most likely include the integration of both word and picture.

Although many of the essays in this collection repeat the same background information as a means of introducing their subject, the collection as a whole raises important questions about what we mean when we refer to a "text" or, indeed, to an "author," and correspondingly, about how we in writing centers can most effectively assist student authors create texts. Writing center people have been grappling with many of these issues for a long time, in particular, the difficulty of deciding how much assistance to provide and the related question of text "ownership" and unintentional plagiarism, and therefore, *Literacy On-line: The Promise and (Peril) of Reading and Writing With Computers* is of particular relevance for us.

Irene Clark
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Sentence errors in the writing conference: The little red caboose

About a year ago I decided to address an issue that I had been skirting for a while. In my zeal to emphasize the writing process and collaborative dialogue in our writing center, I found myself consistently relegating discussion of sentence-level concerns to lowest priority. My annual litany for new writing tutors was "focus on the deeper, structural features of a draft—the focus, thesis, discussion, analysis, relevance, structure of the argument. Then, save a few minutes at the end of your conferences for any recurring grammatical problems." Sentence concerns, like the little red caboose, always came last in the writing conference.

I am aware of the many legitimate reasons for not overemphasizing surface problems. If writers haven't clarified their arguments, why spend time working on individual sentences that ought to be revised or deleted? And we all know that fuzzy thinking begets fuzzy writing. Clean up the thinking, organize the argument, and the style will show tremendous improvement. There is also considerable variation in tutors' ability to identify and counsel on sentence-level problems. Finally, it takes a lot of time to discuss the nuances of comma use; why not stick to what we do best in our writing conferences? Despite these excuses, I felt remiss by not doing more to address grammar problems and resolved to try to address this imbalance.

As I struggled with how to increase focus on sentence-level concerns in writing conferences, I kept returning to a basic dilemma. Writing conference practice thrives because of the liveliness and the immediacy of the discussion of each writer's argument and writing style. How could we transfer that vitality to the discussion of grammar—something viewed by so many students, and tutors, as the driest topic under the sun? Having tutors and writers peruse exercises in handbooks would not do. A more personal approach had to be found, one tailored to our

students discussing their papers with our writing tutors.

A tutor and I began saving examples of problems from student papers. The file of offending sentences grew and grew, but the categories of problems leveled off. Over time, a pattern emerged. The most common sentence level problems for our writers are:

- wordiness
- passive voice
- pronoun reference
- subordination
- parallel structure
- sentence fragments
- punctuation
- dangling or misplaced modifiers
- agreement

With this manageable number of concerns to work with, we decided to compose a handout for students on common sentence level problems found in papers written by students at our college. In order to be as appealing as possible to our writers, the handout had to:

- 1) use real examples, written by our students
We wanted students to see that they were not alone in making these mistakes, and that other, equally good writers had to deal with the same concerns.
- 2) emphasize revision
This handout would take a positive tone and demonstrate the revision of common errors rather than the cataloguing of errors.
- 3) be user-friendly
The handout had to teach writers how to revise their own sentences without direction from someone else. Early on, we decided to delete discussion of punctuation errors. Our text was becoming too long, and to include a thorough discussion of punctuation

would greatly increase the length. This handout had to be short enough so that students would really use it.

The final form, *Revising Common Sentence-Level Errors*, is now in regular use by tutors and students. For each category of error, the format is the same: straightforward explanation of the problem, three to four examples of each error taken from student papers, and possible revisions for each example. Here are several examples of the sentences and revisions:

Passive Voice:

Original Sentence: Through Falstaff, the play is made more comical and successful.

Revision: Falstaff makes the play more comical and successful.

Pronoun Reference:

Original Sentence: Our lab group originally determined dominance on the basis of its fins.

Revision: Our lab group originally determined the fish's dominance on the basis of its fins.

Dangling or Misplaced Modifiers:

Original Sentence: After reading the original study, the article remains unconvincing.

Revision: After reading the original study, I remain unconvinced. (or) The original study is unconvincing.

Subordination:

Original Sentence: The changes in education included a change in curriculum. The changes had a large effect on the mind-set of the Turkish villagers.

Revision: The changes in education, which included a change in curriculum, had a large effect on the mind-set of the Turkish villagers.

Parallel Structure:

Original Sentence: Three reasons why steel companies keep losing money are that their plants are inefficient, high labor costs, and foreign competition is increasing.

Revision: Three reasons why steel companies keep losing money are inefficient plants, high labor costs, and increasing foreign competition.

From its inception, our writing tutors have been very enthusiastic about the handout. The length—six pages—is manageable; the examples are written by fellow students; the focus is on revision; and the explanations are clear. The “little red caboose” is now a

fuller partner in the dialogue around our writing center.

Since writing this handout, tutors and I have used the same format to address several other concerns that often arise in our writing conferences: use of nonsexist language, use of outside sources, and writing introductions and conclusions. The format works for us, and most likely it will for your writing center, too. Keep these tips in mind: limit the topic, avoid jargon, use examples from writing by your students, and emphasize revision rather than identification of the problem.

If you would like to see any of the handouts I have described on revising sentence errors, use of nonsexist language, use of outside sources, and writing introductions and conclusions, contact me through e-mail or “snail-mail” at the following:
e-mail: swilliam@itsmail1.hamilton.edu
U.S. mail: Sharon Williams, Nesbitt-Johnston Reading and Writing Center, Hamilton College, Clinton, NY 13323.

*Sharon Williams
Hamilton College
Clinton, NY*

It's that time of year

Ah, it's late November. And as the holidays rush upon us, so do the visitors to the tutoring center. With their essays in hand, they arrive as predictably as the Christmas decorations after Thanksgiving day. I meet more new faces in these last weeks of school than I do all fall term. They enter the office with breathless anticipation, a hopeful look, and five to seven pages of their rough drafts. Innocently, they make their monumental request: “Look it over and tell me if it's okay.”

Here is our first problem: I cannot take a five-page paper and “look it over” in only twenty minutes. I tell them this, and they plea bargain. They state, “Just read what you can....” They feel rushed, two minutes tick by, and the 12:40 appointment waits outside the door. If I try to rationalize why I cannot “look it over” for them, and I start to explain that the tutoring service is not a proofreading service—zap—I alienate the

students. So, here is the problem: How do I help these last-minute students without divorcing them from the writing lab?

To begin, I do not remind the students of the tutoring center's function—they know, I know, and besides, there is a sign on the door stating: “THIS IS NOT A PROOF-READING SERVICE.” Instead, I tell the students that our time together is brief, so we must focus the session on the basics: thesis, essay development, and a bit of grammar and punctuation.

First, I ask the students to read to me from their essays' introductions. I ask the students if they believe that the essay develops fully, and I have them list their supporting points. Next, I listen to the conclusion, and we discuss whether the essay reached its goal. Lastly, we select any paragraph and examine the grammar and punctuation. We locate one or two common errors (comma or pro-

noun problems, for example) and concentrate on learning the rule that corrects the error.

In twenty minutes, the students leave the tutoring center with a better understanding of their papers because they now know through our brief tutoring session if the papers in their hands have solid thesis statements, supporting points, and conclusions. I did not put them off by refusing to proofread, and they learned a very basic, but useful, revision method. Most importantly, they learned that the writing center is a place where much more happens other than proofreading. And perhaps next term, I will see these last-minute students in the beginning quarter before the Christmas decorations are down in the local malls.

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The text as authority figure

Fear is the companion of students of both sexes and all ages, but it accompanies older women students with particular persistence. I know. Returning to school after twenty years away from the classroom, I worried constantly about my ability to compete with younger, more energetic peers. After working in the Learning Center at Lesley College, I realize my concerns were not unusual.

We women of middle age and beyond have weathered many storms. Many of us are divorced. We have raised children, cared for aging parents, held down responsible jobs. Experts at holding fear at bay, we dress well, smile, maintain eye contact. By going back to school we hope to iron out the rough spots in our training and fill in the gaps, finally attending to needs and desires long buried. But this is scary.

"My stomach's in knots," Mary confides. An attractive woman in her mid-fifties, she sits beside me in the Learning Center explaining her problems. She had an accident a couple of years back. Her head had been injured. Had this caused brain damage? She had such difficulty reading. Why couldn't she "get anything out of a text"? She had to reread again and again. She passed her classes by faking, pretending to understand when she did not, listening to class discussions, reading children's books on subjects she was supposed to learn.

I told her there was nothing wrong with reading children's books, but she was not reassured. "I feel ashamed," she said. "I just can't concentrate. By the time I get to the end of something, I can't remember the beginning. I may look calm to you, but inside my stomach is churning from talking about this."

"Sometimes reading is hard because writers don't write well," I said.

No, the fault was hers, she answered, explaining that she should have received her degree last year, but couldn't complete her reading and writing assignments. Her family doesn't support her studies. "My mother and father give me a hard time. They say, 'What do you need to go to school for?'"

Frantically trying to figure out how to help, I asked Mary if she had brought something for us to work on. She pulled out an article on the earth's atmosphere, and when I suggested she read aloud, she read fluently, having no trouble decoding. I asked her to write down the main idea of the first paragraph; then we skipped to the last. "You've seen how the writer begins; now how does she finish?"

Mary hesitated. I suspected she thought jumping precipitously to the end was risky business. I explained that I found this strategy helpful, though my grammar school teachers had given me the idea that skipping ahead was cheating. Mary's expression told me she had had teachers with similar attitudes, but she went along with my suggestion.

"What you think this author put in the middle of her article?" Mary wanted the author to tell about preserving the earth. So we moved back to the second paragraph to see if the author addressed this issue. Mary had not read far when she paused and said in a small voice, "She keeps saying 'we.' I don't feel that way."

Maybe Mary had suffered brain damage from her accident, but I became convinced at that moment that something else was also contributing to her difficulties. Her earlier words flashed through my mind: "*My mother and father give me a hard time. They say, 'Why do you need to go to school?'*" I could feel the put-down in those words as the voices from my own past flooded back to me: Chet Spinney, who owned a farm near us when I was growing up, asking, "Why do you want to go off to college; you're just going to get married?" Richard Boyce, who sat behind me in study hall drawing dirty pictures, sneering, "What ya got all them books for?" My older sister at the dinner table answering my timid comment about the world situation with "What do *you* know about it?"

Wanting to know, yet fearful that we aren't supposed to know—Mary and I probably first felt these emotions as adolescents. Carol Gilligan's research reveals that at about age 13, girls—especially white girls—

begin to fear speaking honestly about the world as they experience it, afraid that if they speak their truth they will jeopardize their relationships.

I pulled my attention back to Mary who objected to being lumped into an all-inclusive "we." "If you were writing a paper on this article," I told her. "You could begin by saying that you disagree with what the author says in this paragraph."

"But she knows a lot. She's probably written books. What do I know?"

"You know a lot, too." Mary did not look convinced. I continued, "I've learned to argue with authors. I write all over the margins. Things like 'What do you mean?' or 'No' with half a dozen exclamation points after it."

"I couldn't do that," Mary said. "I'd be afraid someone would see it and make fun of me."

"You can talk out loud and tell the writer to buzz off."

"I don't know. My stomach's really churning...."

I realized there are many times when I feel intimidated by a text. Some All-Knowing Authority seems to be behind the words. What right do I have to question? What do I know? Mary feels as if she is entering alien territory when she opens a book, seeing each reading assignment as a confrontation with an Authority who can not be questioned. She risks calling down a terrible wrath if she voices dissent. Yet she can not—will not—give up her resistance to those who want to deny her an education. "I'm very determined," she told me. In spite of the voices in her head that keep asking why she bothers, she intends to get her bachelor's degree.

Her resistance motivates her, but it also bars her way. She believes that authority resides in texts, and she responds to this authority as she responds to real-life authority—by refusing to submit to it. As soon as she comes to a place in the text where her

views diverge from the author's, her concentration breaks and her mind follows its own path. She does not want to concentrate on ideas that seem to threaten what she knows. "I feel like flinging the book across the room," she told me.

Mary deeply cares about protecting the environment, yet when the author of the article she was reading aloud seemed to include her with people who don't care, she switched her mind off. She became so upset that she couldn't remember what the author had really said. When she couldn't remember, the voices of those who had torn down her self-esteem rose to a crescendo. Of course she shouldn't be in school; she couldn't remember what she had read.

"It's safe to disagree with an author," I told Mary. "The paper will just sit there and take whatever you have to say and never talk back. It can't hurt you." But for Mary, believing that is a leap of faith that she is not ready for.

Ideally, reader and writer form a partnership of complimentary equals. Realizing they need each other, they strive to under-

stand and be understood. This mutual respect sometimes leads to an intimate and lasting relationship which is no mere mental tete-a-tete; a writer's words can change the course of a reader's life.

Mary sees the writer's power as a threat. She does not yet realize that the words are powerless unless she chooses to allow them to change her thinking or her actions. She only knows that writers make her feel stupid and silence her private voice which longs to be heard. She thinks that the only way she can control a text is to refuse to receive it. Like the silent women described in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Mary has experienced too many occasions when words were used as weapons, "used to separate and diminish people, not to connect and empower them" (24).

Gilligan's research suggests that when Mary began to ask as a teenager—Do I have a right to know? Can I speak my own truth?—the older women in her life answered her questions with silence. What are they afraid to tell me? she must have wondered.

The puzzling silence of the women, combined with strong male messages that women are inferior, bred fear. Now, decades later, Mary dreads what the voices of authority will say. Lying in wait on the pages of the books she is assigned, will she find the crushing truth that she is not a valuable person and has no right to construct her own knowledge?

Mary and I have much to teach each other. I hope I can show her that paper tigers not only do not bite, they can be tamed. She had already helped me to understand how lived experience joins with academic knowledge to create insight.

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