

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

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

December, 1993

...FROM THE EDITOR...

You'll find this issue of the newsletter particularly rich with voices interacting—high school tutors joking with their director, English education majors reflecting on their work with middle school students, a writing center director in a new setting asking the rest of us for some help, voices on the WCenter discussion group conversing electronically, a tutor sharing with the rest of us her growth as a writer and a tutor of writers, two reviewers of a new book on writing centers offering different perspectives on the same book, and a description and calls for proposals for our first NWCA conference, which promises to be a highly interactive meeting...even for those who can't attend in person. Some issues of the newsletter are quieter, with a few voices talking to the rest of us. This month's issue is noisier as you'll be stepping into all kinds of conversations.

This is also a month when we can look forward to a lull in what so many of us have noticed is an incredibly hectic semester. We must be doing something right in having so many writers flooding in our doors. But we have also earned the vacation quiet that is fast approaching. A joyous holiday to us all, and may the new year be one of peace, happiness, and continued opportunities to continue talking/writing/e-mailing to each other and our students.

•Muriel Harris

...INSIDE...

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White lies in the writing center: The fragile balance between praise and criticism

A young woman, Sally, came to my office recently, handed me the draft of an essay, and with a look of self-revulsion said, "I'm a terrible writer."

My automatic response was, "I'm sure you're better than you think." When I finished reading, I said I'd seen worse (which was true, if barely) and that with hard work she could hope for improvement (also true, if unlikely). I stopped short of revealing the whole truth, or my perception of it, because my job is to help students, not devastate them. Unlike those who seek compliments by saying they can't write—and who might benefit from a therapeutic jolt of honesty—Sally believed it. To focus on the negative qualities of her writing rather than the few positive ones might only confirm this belief and leave her despairing. And yet, good intentions aside, by telling her what amounted to a white lie I put myself in a difficult ethical bind.

Sissela Bok says, "whether to lie, equivocate, be silent or tell the truth in any given situation is often a hard decision" (xvi). This is especially true in writing centers, where

telling students the harsh truth can bring wounded feelings, discouragement, and hostility instead of the progress we intend. As tutors, we like to think of the center as a place students can go for a candid opinion of their work. But in the messy give and take of the tutorial, hidden needs, desires, fears, and conceits can get in the way of honest discourse. Students sometimes hide their real reasons for visiting the center even from themselves. They may cryptically ask us to make sure an essay “flows” when they actually want it edited. Or, secretly fearing it falls apart after the introduction, they may ask for help with semi-colons. As tutors, we want to nurture students. And our jobs depend on the repeated use of the bad news, even if, as in Sally’s case, this means exaggerating the good. This delicate balance between praise and criticism sometimes means we must choose among the straight, sometimes brutal truth, a softened half-truth, or even an out-and-out white lie.

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Editor: Muriel Harris, English, Purdue University, 1356 Heavilon, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356 (317)494-3723. e-mail:harrism@mace.cc.purdue.edu

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

Please send articles, reviews, announcements, comments, queries, and yearly subscription payments to the editor.

The easiest stand one can take on the issue of honesty in the writing center is that a tutor should tell nothing but the truth. Kenneth G. Pobo says students “want us to encourage them but they do not want to be lied to. . . . They want and deserve our honesty” (5). As a general principle, he’s right, honesty is good policy—to be preferred over its alternatives—and I would not advocate wholesale lying as standard writing center practice. To pretend that students and tutors never deceive one another, however, would be an act of self-deception, as would too much confidence in our own candor. As Richard C. Cabot warns, “The ‘bald truth,’ the ‘naked truth,’ the ‘brutal truth,’ are generally untrue because they are told with irritation or with malice. . . . The intention is not to convey fact and feeling but to blow off steam” (192). So, while striving to be honest, we must recognize the times when telling a white lie may be necessary and, in rare cases, even moral. Perhaps our best hope of doing so is to examine the types of lies students and tutors resort to, the motives behind them, and their impact on our work.

In a tutorial, we diagnose a student’s needs based in part on our reading of her text but also on what she reveals about her professor, her assignment, and her writing problems. If she is forthright, and many are, we have at least an even chance of giving good advice. If she misleads us, for whatever reason, our best shot will likely miss its target. Yet, counter productive as deception may be, students will resort to it, most often out of a perceived need for self-defense.

Margaret Lewis Furse distinguishes among the types of lies by “the relative strength and weakness of the liar and the lied to” (59). Lies told from weakness include “The *ingratiating lie* by which the weak seek the praise or favor of the strong who are presumed to be benevolent” and “The *self-protective lie* by which the weak seek safety from a threatening force” (59, emphasis in original). Students place themselves in a position of weakness merely by asking for our help, so these categories cover many of the lies they might tell us.

A student may resort to an ingratiating lie in hopes of garnering special treatment or forestalling criticism. For instance, he might start a session by pleading helplessness, saying, “Thank God for the writing center. I’ve been trying for weeks and can’t get any-

where.” Glancing at a desk photo, he might add, “Wow, cute kid! Oh, and by the way, everybody in my dorm said if I came here you were the person to see.”

This could be true, of course, or said out of simple charm. We all use polite lies to put people at ease in social situations, saying we’re happy to see one another even if we aren’t. But the student with hidden motives can use flattery as a tactic to make us eager to please—and perhaps do too much for him—or reluctant to hurt his feelings—and perhaps do too little.

Usually, we can see through ingratiating lies if we control our egos, but students’ self-protective lies, rooted in fear, are harder to defend against. Meant to keep trouble at bay or self esteem intact, they use these lies frequently in the classroom to explain late work with such excuses as “the computer ate it” and “my roommate’s suicidal again.” Writing centers pose fewer direct threats than the classroom, and so ought to inspire fewer self-protective lies. But the many threatening forces arrayed against students do not fall away at the writing center door. They include external threats, such as deadlines, grades, parental expectations, and tough professors, and internal threats, such as unrealistic goals, fear of failure, and what psychiatrists term “social fears,” among which are fear of criticism, fear of disapproval, fear of rejection, fear of meeting a stranger, and fear of authority figures (Agras 122), all of which students are likely to confront in the writing center.

The brave souls with enough integrity to meet these forces head-on deserve our admiration. And knowing the pressures they face, we can easily forgive the self-deceptive students whose lies, though frustrating, hurt only themselves. Consider Noelle, for instance, who recently excused her tangled logic and haphazard punctuation by saying, “I’m a creative writer.” A few students, though, will tell lies of greater scope, harder to overlook. Such was the case of Glen, who brought me a twelve-page technical writing paper that read well but ended abruptly. When I mentioned this, he said, “My teacher told us not to bother with a formal conclusion.”

His instructor, my colleague in the writing center, was out of her office at the time, but I felt certain she would never say such a thing.

"Are you sure you understood?" I asked. "She's a stickler for complete papers."

"I'm sure," Glen said, "but thanks for your help."

Our offices are cubicles whose walls stop short of the ceiling, so I overheard when Glen returned to confront his instructor about the "D" he'd received. "Sorry, but your paper drops off without a conclusion," she said. "It's fine until then, but as is you're lucky you didn't fail."

"But I was here only last week," Glen said, "and the man who helped me said I didn't need a conclusion."

Such lies are dangerous, not so much because they can cause heart attacks but because they can hurt our reputations. Told to the wrong person—a parent or a dean—they may put us in the untenable position of proving what we said. My own students have blamed tutors for adding incorrect punctuation, for suggesting ideas that led papers astray, and for cutting whole paragraphs that, left alone, would surely have earned an "A." Knowing our tutors work hard not to edit, I usually reply, "Sorry, but the tutor isn't responsible for your paper, you are. If you take bad advice, it's unfortunate, but it's your choice." Glen's instructor said something similar, ending that particular crisis. But the problem with letting ourselves off the hook for our advice is that unlike Glen, whose self-protective lie escalated to an accusation, some students really do fall victim to tutors' usually well-meant, if often misguided, deception.

If students lie mostly from a position of weakness, we do so from a position of relative strength, although, caught between students and numerous authority figures—parents, professors, and administrators, as well as our own egos—we engage in our share of self-protective lies. According to Furse, lies told from strength include "The *sinister lie* of malicious intent told by the strong to deceive the weak" and "The *paternalistic lie* told by the strong to deceive in order to protect the weak" (59, emphasis in original). Since the sinister lie is told "to gain even further dominance over the weak who are already dominated" and is "a brutally unnecessary lie" (60), we can dispose of it quickly as immoral and, therefore, unsuitable for use by a tutor—at least while on the job.

Before looking at paternalistic lies, whose good intentions give them a fighting chance of being moral, let's consider the lies we tell out of selfish motives, more likely to cloud our judgment and have a harmful impact. First, there is Carl Weinberg's "helping shuck," by which teachers reason, "If we are certain we help students, then their failure must be seen as a failure to use our help. This kind of thinking extends the shuck to its limits, protecting the shucker against any possibility of failure himself" (16).

We pride ourselves on giving good advice and delivering it clearly. So when a student fails to understand a simple concept, and we begin to flounder, we may fall back on jargon, speaking eloquently of *ethos* or *development* while the student retreats or, afraid to look ignorant, nods and takes notes, hoping to decipher them later. Meanwhile, we take comfort in having done as well as we could under trying circumstances. As William Zinsser says, "By using a more pompous phrase" the professional person "not only sounds more important, he blunts the painful edge of truth" (15).

Jeff Brooks discusses the flip side of the helping shuck. Viewing ourselves as the students' selfless rescuers, we may assume responsibility for improving imperfect papers when "our job is to improve their writers" (2). By doing so, Brooks says, we step out of the tutor role and "automatically relegate ourselves to the role of editor" (2). This shift is tempting because "it makes everyone involved feel good: the student goes away happy with a good grade, admiring you, you feel intelligent, useful, helpful—everything a good teacher ought to be" (1), except, of course, a good teacher.

Teachers don't stop with self-deception, of course. Before I taught my first class as a graduate assistant, my faculty mentor warned, "For God's sake, whatever you do, don't start off by admitting how little you know. The students will eat you alive." Such self-protective deceit is rooted in a "fear of exposure, of being found out" (Tompkins 654). As Jane Tompkins says, teachers create "a kind of false self. . . split into two parts: the real backstage self who didn't know anything and the performing self who got others to believe in its expertise" (654-665). As tutors, our performing selves may be reluctant to show ignorance about the Renaissance or to admit we never

found the time to read Plato's *Republic*. Rather than come clean—our only ethical move—we may hedge, saying, "Plato, huh? Well, to be honest, it's been a few years." And although better than claiming expertise, this may give students too much faith in our advice.

The selfish interest in defensive lies should warn us against their use, for, as Bok says, "Are we not more wary where the lie obviously benefits the liar?" (85). When self-protective lies also appear to protect the interests of others, however, our duty is less clear. At the end of tutorials, students often ask, "What grade do you think I'll get?" I usually say, "Only your professor can answer that." Deep down, I may believe it's a "B," but saying so risks setting the student up for a fall and undercutting a professor's authority should our grading scales differ. Also, when I am faced with a baffling assignment—for instance, "In the third-person, write a 500-word essay on your world view"—acknowledging its absurdity may only panic the student or alienate the professor, serving no one's best interest.

As Bok cautions, however, "even the most self-serving liars use the shield of altruism" (85), and this often holds true for lies told for supposedly good reasons, including paternalistic lies. Like doctors who conceal a grim prognosis, we sometimes hide a harsh truth that might cause paralysis (writer's block) or, with an encouraging lie, boost a student toward higher accomplishment. Take Jackie, for example, who suffers from a learning disability but dreams of writing for a living. Impractical as her goal may be, she works hard—drafting short pieces as many as fifteen times—and earns slightly above average grades.

Deciding how honest to be with Jackie is more difficult than it first appears. Giving her the complete truth might save her years of struggle in the wrong field and therefore be an act of kindness. As Cabot says, "a truthful answer might be a relief. . . . Perhaps she already desires to give it up" (191). Or, dream shattered, Jackie might stop trying altogether, failing even to finish school. To act humanely, we must first question our motives. One tutor I know, outraged by the attitude of a Master's candidate in education with whom she labored for weeks, and who clearly wanted her to rewrite his thesis, finally said, "You have poor writing skills and

show no desire to improve. How can you hope to go into the public schools and teach English?" The tutor said she wanted to motivate the student, but the effect of her honesty was to drive him off, beyond our influence—perhaps straight into the public schools. Had she strung him along with white lies, which "so often fail to achieve the intended benefits" (Bok 85), she may only have kept him "in a position of dependency" (Furse 174).

So where does this leave us when dealing with a Sally or a Jackie? "That some lies are justified," Furse says, "is something I take for granted although I think some uneasiness and regret should attend even a necessary lie" (58). She adds that "In the final analysis, the one who is deciding to tell the truth or to lie must know himself and his situation as well as he can" (75). Attaining firm knowledge is difficult even in the hard sciences, as illustrated by the following maxim for young geologists: "Say not 'This is the truth' but 'So it seems to me to be as I now see the things I think I see'" (McPhee 112). This plea for humble skepticism of one's ability to know the truth applies to our profession as well, since knowing the full situation in a tutorial would mean accurately assessing our own motives and the student's needs, either of which may be hidden from us, intentionally or not.

To build a writing center favorable to honest discourse under such circumstances, we would do well to adopt what Bok calls a "presumption against lying" (34). As she says, in any situation where a lie is a possible choice, one must first seek truthful alternatives. If lies and truthful statements appear to achieve the same result or appear to be as desirable to the person contemplating lying the lies should be ruled out. And only where a lie is a *last resort* can one even begin to consider whether or not it is morally justified" (33, emphasis in original).

Within these constraints, we're free—if a careful examination of motives, needs, and consequences reveals a pressing need—to risk a white lie to inspire greater effort or avoid the unnecessary wounding of a fragile ego. Otherwise, as Cabot urges, we're ethically bound "to tell the truth (so far as we know it) so that it will hurt as little as it can, in a world where realities are not always pleasant" (197).

Steve Sherwood
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, TX

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Job Opening

Writing Lab Coordinator: Senior Instructor or Assistant Professor

Three-year contract beginning 9/15/94. MA required, Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition (or equivalent) preferred. Experience in teaching writing, tutoring, and administering a writing lab preferred. Duties include coordinating a growing writing lab, training and supervising tutors, outreach to university faculty, and teaching one writing course per term. Send vita and three letters of reference by March 1, 1994 to Shelley C. Reece, Chair, English Department, Portland State University, Portland, OR 97207. All applications acknowledged. EO/AA.

Hello? Is anyone there?

Dateline, St. Louis, MO: Eric Hobson here and I need help. I've embarked on a journey into the academic foreign regions of pharmacy education, having agreed to join the faculty at St. Louis College of Pharmacy (StLCOP) to establish a writing center and to assist its effort to make WAC a reality.

StLCOP's commitment to developing professionals in the discipline of pharmacy reflects a commitment spearheaded by the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP). AACP has challenged its membership to embrace the concept of "pharmaceutical care," a commitment to providing the public with pharmacists who are capable problem solvers, competent communicators, committed members of health care teams, and life-long learners. The level of nationwide interest in what we are attempting here is exciting. Colleges of pharmacy have contacted me requesting that I keep them up-to-date on our efforts.

Particularly, several pharmacy programs and pharmacy journals would like more information about how writing centers intersect with the evolving missions of colleges of pharmacy and how pharmacy students can benefit from the types of services writing centers provide.

This is where I need your help. If your writing center is part of a college or university which houses or is affiliated with one of the 75 colleges of pharmacy in the US, or the 12 in Canada, would you drop me a line and let me know? I would like to make this information available to pharmacy students across the continent. They need to know—more importantly, *they want to know*—how they too can use writing centers. Before they can use our services, however, they need to know that they are available and how to get in touch with us.

Write to: Eric Hobson, Director, The StLCOP Writing Center, St. Louis College of Pharmacy, 4588 Parkview Place, St. Louis, MO 63110. Office phone: (314) 367-8700, X244, Fax: 314-367-8132. Thanks for your help.

A good laugh is sunshine in a house or a writing center

When the Caldwell family wanted to endow the chair of composition at The McCallie School, Hacker Caldwell discovered that Randolph-Macon Women's College had a writing center. He phoned to find out about it. As he describes the incident:

"When I asked the switchboard operator for the writing center, she transferred me to a pleasant sounding fellow. I introduced myself, told him about our Foundation, our decision to endow a chair at McCallie School and that we weren't satisfied with English and were considering writing. His slight acknowledgment to that information sounded somewhat disinterested and confused, so I asked him to explain what his writing center was like. His response was, 'We got a real good dirt floor, but our problem is we only got six horses.' In total confusion, I told him how I could see that would be a problem, thanked him and hung up. Of course, what I had gotten was the riding, R-I-D-I-N-G center, not the writing center. At that point I considered changing the chair to one in speech."

That incident led me to believe that McCallie was the right place for me!

William Makepeace Thackeray said, "A good laugh is sunshine in a house." I think it is also sunshine in a writing center. More importantly, I think laughter is an integral part of a writing center, by my definition. That is, if a writing center is just that—a center for writing, a place where there is a reverence for writing, a low-risk environment—then laughter is a necessity. It is part of the self-examination, self-discovery of the writer. As we play word games with our own pieces of writing and the writing of our peers, we discover things we didn't know about ourselves and our writing. For instance, with simple games where we have others pick and underline favorite words, phrases, passages, we sometimes end up laughing at what we thought was a clear statement that communicates an entirely different, and possibly absurd, definition or image. Just reading our papers aloud to a listener whom we trust in the writing center can cause us to discover areas that need improvement. The activity may also cause laughter

as someone reveals humorous incidents, such as "how you got locked in the locker room of the opposite sex freshman year" (Jana).

When teams of writers work together as part of collaborative learning, laughter invariably ensues. If it doesn't, then the atmosphere is not comfortable enough for the students to work in a low-risk environment. "The writing center feels like home in school, where I know I can be myself and depend on others" (Wendy).

In our writing center at Red Bank Regional High School, we had a chalkboard in the corner called QOTD. Students would bring quotes that they wanted to share with others and write them under the Quotes of the Day. Michael recalls, "I'd always be sure to stop in every once in a while to write a 'Quote of the Day' on the board. If I had to describe my high school writing center in three words, I'd choose 'innovative, warm, and free.'"

Because of the interaction among writers in the writing center, Vicki remembers, "When I recall my experiences in the writing center, I hear laughter, plenty of laughter. . . . Come to think of it, most of the constructive criticism came from other students rather than Mrs. Farrell." The idea of responding to each other's work with a sense of confidentiality enables writers to give honest feedback. "In open discussion," says Michael, "spontaneous combustion would take place that would be reflected in my next piece of writing." The enthusiasm of a receptive audience encourages all of us to do better.

Another aspect of the role of laughter is the warm, accepting environment it helps to create. Students who are having emotional or academic problems have found the writing center to be a place where they can let off steam. Brenda found that she could go to the writing center "whenever I feel down or I have a little joy of my own to share." Regan discovered that her emotional problems were causing a block in all her academic learning. Mike suggested that they carry on a dialog on the computer. Immediately, Regan began

tapping away on the keyboard with Mike at her side. He gave his response to her thoughts and pretty soon, they were laughing at the monitor. For four years the dialog journals continued on their disks. Ideas for pieces of writing in classes, poems to enter in contests developed from these journal entries. Regan recalls, "I learned new ways to express myself, through words and writing."

The laughter in a writing center not only gives it a warm atmosphere, it also creates one in which writers are willing to share. Because all of us as writers respond so negatively to rejection, we decided to create a board for rejection letters. Brenda explains, "When submitting to contests there is that fear of rejection. I like the idea of bringing in your rejection letters to share. It just shows that everyone is not perfect."

Tutors as well as writers and directors must engage in laughter. When Chris, one of the tutors, put together a writing weakness unit on point of view (a problem of lack of consistency in point of view in papers), he came up with two humorous activities:

- A. Describe an object (pick one):
1. As if you were attempting to sell it.
 2. As if you were trying to buy it at the lowest possible price.
 3. As if you had never seen anything like it before (you are from Alpha Centauri).
 4. As a child of ten might describe it.
 5. As your mother, father, sister, or brother might describe it.
 6. As someone who is blind might describe it.

B. Think of a controversial topic that you feel strongly about (or at least somewhat strongly). This could be any topic for which there is generally more than one point of view. Now that you have your topic, write a persuasive paragraph for the opposite of what you feel strongly about. A more controversial topic that you really feel strongly about works better.

Example: Vikki thinks, "Hmmm, horror stories are an acceptable form of literature." So she writes, "Horror

stories corrupt the minds of today's youth and are in no way an acceptable form of literature.

Chris has used humor in creating two writing exercises to help students recognize point of view and become more adept at moving from one point of view to another with a piece of writing.

Finally, writing center directors need the therapy only laughter can bring. One day when I returned from a hospital visit during my lunch period, the students noticed I was emotionally and physically shot. While I was conferencing with a student, two of them slipped behind me and wrote on the chalkboard, "Mrs. Farrell is a person, too!" We all laughed at that one.

To conclude, I'd like to describe an incident that took place in the McCallie writing center this fall. Jason had worked on revision after revision of his short story "The Eyes of the Beholder." He had gotten feedback from everyone who walked in the door. A tenth grader, he and his friends went through *Writer's Market* discussing possibilities. They never said a word to me or asked my advice on what to do with his short story, so I figured it would be a good learning experience for them to discover for themselves how to submit for publication. A few days later amidst giggles from the other side of the room, Jason asked me about a SASE and a cover letter. I explained what they were, showed him several examples of cover letters, and offered him blank envelopes. That was before Christmas. At the end of January, Jason came running in the writing center yelling, "I got my rejection letter!" I immediately asked that he bring it in to share. He sort of blushed and said, "Sure." Two days later he stopped by to tell me he now had two of them, and I reminded him to bring them in. Finally, a week later Jason, followed by an entourage of his friends, entered the writing center and handed me two slips of paper. One had *Epoch: A Magazine of Contemporary Literature* written across the top and the other had a familiar bunny on top. Sure enough, Jason had submitted his story to *Playboy* and took great delight in telling me and his friends that his story "is not suitable for use" in its publication! What status! Yes, laughter is a necessary part of every writing center.

Pamela B. Farrell-Childers
The McCallie School
Chattanooga, TN

The role of a writing center in a teacher education program

As an instructor of pre-service teachers, I draw on my public school teaching experiences to make the courses I teach relevant. I am aware of the limitations of this approach. First, my stories are getting old; and second, as the teller of stories, I place myself in the role of expert and the undergraduates in the role of vicarious learners. The use of second-hand stories was a desperate attempt on my part to help undergraduates in methods courses interact on some level with "real students."

Last year, almost on a whim, the scenario changed. In a casual conversation, the director of the University of Wyoming Writing Center mentioned to me her desire to open a writing center at the University School which is housed in the College of Education. She viewed it as a service to the students who attended it. I agreed and thought immediately of the education students who were in need of practical experience.

Soon, a writing center was opened in University School. It was staffed by English education students enrolled in a Methods of Teaching Writing course. Students in grades 6, 7, 8, and 9 were invited to visit the writing center for assistance on papers they were writing in any subject area. The middle school/junior high students were also encouraged to bring personal writing they were doing outside of class for conferences during lunch hour.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the impact the writing center experience had on the English education students who staffed it. The information presented is taken from the undergraduates' weekly journal entries and from my observations and conversations with them in the writing center. As the "data" were analyzed inductively, two themes emerged. One, the college students valued the practical experience they gained from their interaction with "real" kids, and two, the undergraduates experienced firsthand some of the rewards and frustrations of teaching.

For example, one English education student wrote in her journal around mid-semester,

"I think working in the writing center is the most useful thing I've done in all my college days. This is an excellent place to put the things that you are learning to actual use. It is different than when you memorize the material the teacher tells you you'll need when you have your own class."

Another student wrote at the end of the semester, "The junior high students weren't the only ones to benefit from this, we definitely did too. The practical experience we had working with students was unbeatable. It was good for us to see what kids are writing about these days, and what assignments interest them and don't interest them."

In the college methods class, the undergraduates began sharing stories about the conferences they held, the things kids were writing, and their concern about the kinds of assignments that were made. As a result, I found myself telling fewer of my own, old stories. For example, Jill mentioned that "there were some assignments that students were working on that didn't seem to encourage good writing. The students had good ideas and material to work with; it was just that the assignment didn't allow for good, clear writing." She explained that this made her think about the kind of writing she will require her students to do.

The writing center made the material presented in the methods class pertinent. As Monica explained, "I discovered that the writing activities and strategies we read about in books by Murray and Romano really do work. I used listing, mapping, webbing, and freewriting. Some of the junior high students were amazed that they enjoyed these activities and that they were beneficial."

Comments like these were typical of the entries made in the undergraduates' journals. The college students also kept a list of recommendations for improving the writing center. The following vignettes reflected their thinking:

Rachael wrote: "There was a problem. After the writing center was two months old,

we lost a lot of clients. I'm not sure what happened, but students stopped coming in for help as often as they had in the first two months. I don't think that the assignments stopped. Many students would come in and work on their own and not want help from us. We still saw some of the same self-motivated students but not as frequently. In time, I feel that teachers will begin to work with us and use the writing center more often. More teacher cooperation couldn't hurt. Perhaps putting up signs that advertise and explain the writing center in every classroom would help."

Randy pointed out that perhaps there was a stigma attached to visiting the writing center. He wrote: "Recently, some of my kids said to me that if they use the writing center, they must be stupid. James said that he didn't need to come here because he's not retarded. There seems to be a stigma on special help. They don't feel comfortable getting special help. They seem to think that kids who get help are stupid."

Sandy brought up the most controversial issue of the writing center—the fact that public computers were located in the writing center. Her entry read, "The more I think about the computers, the more convinced I become that we need to designate the computers in the writing center as ours (if they actually can be?) If not, then they should be moved to another area. Perhaps it would be possible to designate them as word processor computers so that only writers could use them. Some of the teachers might not agree, but it would give the center more credibility."

Carol agreed with Sandy. She wrote: "Another observation that I don't have an answer for, but may be an option, has to do with the computers. I have mixed feelings about this so I'm not taking a firm stand. I wonder what would happen if the computers were separated from the writing center? Having the computers elsewhere might clear up any confusion about the purpose of the writing center. The way it is set up now the students don't necessarily come there to work on their writing. They also come to work or play on the computers."

Not all of the college students found the computers in the writing center problematic;

many supported their use. In fact, one undergraduate wrote a position paper defending computers in the writing center and reviewed the research on computers and conferencing to substantiate his position.

After reviewing the students' journal entries in regard to pros and cons of staffing a writing center, I reviewed my own journal. Much of what the students discussed showed up in my journal as well. For example, one entry toward the end of the semester read, "The students have been engaged in more teacherly activities this semester than ever before. They are staffing the writing center, submitting a proposal for the Wyoming Conference on Teaching English, judging the Wyoming Young Author's Contest, and talking with English teachers out in the state via compressed video. Our relationship feels collegial."

The collegial relationship that developed among the undergraduates and me was an unexpected outcome of the writing center experience. We gathered for staff meetings, analyzed our efforts, solved problems, and speculated on changes for the writing center. Throughout the experience, a sense of confidence and authority permeated the undergraduates' discussion of their work in the writing center.

In conclusion, while the benefits of working in the writing center reinforced the undergraduates' desire to have their own classrooms, it was the frustrations that proved instructive. For example, the concerns the undergraduates had about the operation of the writing center led them to the professional literature. They were curious what the research had to say about faculty support, recruiting clients, successful and unsuccessful assignments, and the use of computers in a writing center.

The students were pleased to find that their frustrations were consistent with problems encountered in other writing centers (Harris; Farrell). The seriousness with which the college students problem-solved indicated to me that they ceased seeing themselves as students and saw themselves as teachers. Staffing a junior high writing center bridged a theory/practice gap which characterized the traditional Methods of Teaching Writing class and made the teaching of writing real.

Epilogue

As a final piece in this reflection of the writing center experience, I want to share a professional story that resulted from the undergraduates' work in the writing center. Six English education students from the writing center staff served on a panel at a Wyoming Conference on Teaching English held at the University of Wyoming. The title of their panel presentation was "What Did I Learn About Writing and Teaching Writing From Working in a Middle School/Junior High Writing Center?" The panel presentation was well-received and the undergraduates enjoyed scholarly dialogue with college English teachers and high school teachers who welcomed them to the professional community. It was a confirmation of what they experienced as undergraduates in English education serving as staff members of a middle school/junior high writing center.

Norma Decker Collins
University of Wyoming
Laramie, Wyoming

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VOICES FROM THE NET

Weird (?) topics: A pressure point in the negotiation of student authority

Students should assume authority over and take responsibility for their own writing. This tenet seems to be one of the most stable characteristics of the writing center self-image, a durable article of faith for the past decade, perhaps. But as the following WCenter* discussion suggests (and we've known all along), student authority is never absolute and neither is our role as enablers of authority. Somewhere between student disengagement and responsibility lies a gray area where students and tutors negotiate what's appropriate and effective for each writing situation, considering the practical and rhetorical impact of their words.

When Marjorie Keil shared with the group a surprising (and graphically rendered) paper topic she had encountered, the discussion turned to the subject of appropriateness, how it is determined, and what degree of intervention and redirection on the part of tutors is best. Because there is no "right" answer when it comes to deciding what topics are appropriate and how much freedom students should have in exploring the boundaries of appropriateness, this issue made for good discussion fodder. Should tutors draw the line at content intended to shock? at excessively mundane topics? at any point?

Wednesday, 29 September 1993

From: Marjorie Keil

After four years of writing centers, I thought I'd read all the good, the bad, and the ugly, but yesterday's experience broke new ground, crossed all boundaries, etc. Written by a male, it began "Now I know how women feel. . . ." The subject was his medical exam by a proctologist! By the third sentence, I told him some things were best kept in one's journal. Exhibitionist writing? The pen IS mightier than a flash.

Still stunned. . .

Friday, 1 October

From: Ken Smith

I sometimes wonder if students who write

shocking papers are doing it as a kind of indirect protest because they are not reading the freedom of topic choice, say, of our classrooms as a useful liberty. Instead, they may be seeing it as an aimless or arbitrary operation not of their own choosing, serving goals they don't immediately buy into, and as a result they register their protest indirectly, almost intuitively, by taking us at our words when we offer freedom. They test whether we really mean it or not, whether we are lurking there ready to take it back if they step out of line.

There was a very interesting story in *College English* about two years ago, in an article by Lad Tobin, about several students who rebelled in his composition class, including one who wrote a process analysis paper in which he told how to make a peanut butter sandwich. Tobin had told the class they could write about anything, that anything could, if done right, make a good essay topic, even something as simple as how to make a peanut butter sandwich. I understand what he was trying to tell his students, but I don't blame a student for thinking the course was going to be silly or irrelevant when it is being described that way. (I also admire Tobin for telling the *College English* readership about a time he was struggling as a teacher, and for making a helpful essay out of the experience—that was risky for him, I'm sure.)

So when I see a paper that is wildly inappropriate, I do consider talking to the student about audience and other things that folks have been bringing up, but I also consider whether the student is satirizing the course. . . . I like the autonomy it implies for the student. It's not passive at all.

Friday, 1 October

From: Mickey Harris

Ken,

Thanks for all the analyzing of motives as to why students choose wildly inappropriate

topics. . . . We always have one session on tutoring problems, including what a tutor does when faced with a paper where the topic is problematic. I have a paper written by a student assigned to describe a teacher he admired. Instead, he went on, in truly repulsive detail, about a teacher with a hairlip. He included vivid pictures of how the guy's spit drooled down the board as he spoke and what types of mean-spirited things the writer did to the teacher. The tutors-to-be have to talk about how to respond to such a paper, and the discussion gets pretty heavy. It also introduces the whole problem of the writer's motives, the tutor's need to bring up audience, and ultimately, the tutor's goals and whole role in being there.

Monday, 4 October

From: Paul Ellis

I'm not sure the idea of weird as defined by English comp teachers is very universal.

For example, the "why I got a tattoo" subject. I don't have any tattoos on my body and frankly cannot imagine why anyone would go through that pain. But I would love to read a paper that would explain it to me. It seems like an excellent topic. Perhaps the thesis would be something like this: Tattoo aficionados, like writers, go through the pain for the sake of beauty. Good topics don't always lead to good papers, of course.

Monday, 4 October

From: Lori Krasienko

I agree that there definitely should be a purpose for the papers, but if you can convince your students to consider audience when writing a paper, they may make something trivial into something worthwhile. I think we give our students too little credit. If we let them work out what "works" and what doesn't on their own, isn't it a better learning experience than the instructor telling them "No, you can't write on that"? Doesn't it offer the students an opportunity to make their own decisions/mistakes? When we say

no to a topic, they often get turned off to class in general. I'm dealing with the same sort of thing in my class. I'm still a student too, and I'd rather be able to make my own decisions, even if they are pretty stupid.

Tuesday, 5 October

From: Beth Boquet

Paul,

Re the tattoo subject: I once received a paper on why (and how) one of my students got a tattoo. It was a "great" paper, and the student received an A, on the paper and in the class. Obviously, he was a good writer, but the topic itself was very intriguing to me—and to the rest of the class, I might add. After he presented his paper to the class, everyone wanted to look at his tattoos, see which ones he had gotten first, which ones took the longest, hurt the most, etc. They were fascinated. And I think they were also forced to confront some of their stereotypes and preconceptions about the type of people who get tattoos. Isn't all of the above what we're trying to get our students to do in our writing classes? Sometimes it works really well; sometimes it flops.

Tuesday, 5 October

From: Joseph Hart

The recently departed Bill Stafford—a wonderful, wonderful poet—used to talk about exactly this subject: He said (paraphrasing) that a writer finds a golden thread attached to the trivial objects around us, and following that thread leads you to some essential understanding of life. While that may not be cutting edge composition theory, there is some truth in it.

Tuesday, 5 October

From: Jeanne H. Simpson

Joseph,

You said it so well. Any subject is potentially interesting. It is the writer's challenge to match subject, audience, and treatment. And when Marjorie quoted the first sentence of the proctology paper, "Now I know how women feel. . .," I was immediately interested. I thought that was a great start and I wanted to hear more. Obviously, some clinical details would be necessary to make the point.

I've been re-reading this Weird Paper conversation after an absence of several days (I was moving, which is, as far as I'm concerned, the equivalent of a proctologic examination)—and I see several issues through

the talk. One involves tutoring methodology. The other is a larger ethical issue about ownership and the "please the teacher" problem. Note also that the same question is being discussed, though from a different starting point, with regard to faculty members who misperceive writing center activities. "Please the teacher" is a tough game, and not just for students. Writing center personnel walk the same fine line.

Tuesday 5, October

From: Marjorie Keil

Those of you who responded to the proctologist paper (sounds like John Grisham's next novel) have certainly given new meaning to the term learning experience. Now that the dust—and other things—have settled, I've had a chance to put my own reaction into perspective.

Yes, I should have framed my response in terms of embarrassment and discussed audience. However, I still feel really uncomfortable about approaching that level of intimacy with a student, or colleague, or anyone I don't know very well. It's one thing to engage with a writer and a text, another to be held hostage by them. Admittedly, this is a personal response and not an objective, professional one, but regardless of the roles we play in the writing conference, on either side of that text sit two human beings. Given our heightened awareness of harassment and the need to set limits, I felt justified. Only twice have I ended sessions abruptly: four years ago as a TA while being bullied by a student angry with a professor, and last week.

This *is* assuming the position of authority we in writing centers work so hard to break down, but the line I heard at a 1992 4C's WC session keeps replaying—"Just because we provide service doesn't mean we have to be subservient." Granted, this is taken out of context (originally, it referred to WC's position in the academy), but it fits here too.

NEVER setting up ourselves as THE authority reflects what I think of as Writing Center Voodoo: the letter of the law, rather than the spirit. Thanks for all the insights and unusual-paper stories. . . a veritable verbal *Far Side*.

Tuesday, 5 October

From: Paula Gillespie

All this discussion of the weirdness of papers takes me back to last spring when, as

some of you remember, a student threatened one of our tutors and was very verbally abusive. Before the threat, the student weirded out one of our tutors (male) with a paper that was full of violence, vividly detailed. The tutor came to me, wondering how to respond to the paper, since the student was coming back. We agreed, if I recall correctly, that he had the right to respond as a reader, or to pose questions about how the writer expected his audience to react to his paper. That, of course, was right before the threat.

The threat, of course, put us in touch with his instructor, who told us she was frightened by his paper. This is an extreme case, but is there a point at which a paper topic should signal some concerns about the student, and what are your ideas about ways to handle such circumstances?

*Eric Crump
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO*

* The comments in this column were posted to WCenter, an electronic forum for writing center aficionados (including students, tutors, directors, and administrators) hosted by Texas Tech University. The forum was started in 1991 by Lady Falls Brown, TTU writing center director, and it is managed by Fred Kemp, TTU 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`

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

When confronted by the repugnant, the dishonest, or the potentially dangerous essay in a writing conference, what should we do?

There is certainly no easy answer to this question, and there are probably few general ethical principles for tutorial conferences that any of us would feel comfortable establishing as hard and fast rules that will apply to all situations under all circumstances. My own sense of things is that the choices tutors make and the ethical stances they apply will be inseparable from contexts. The "right" thing to do for one student who is agonizing over instructor comments on a paper might, in turn, be the wrong thing to do for a different student, a different instructor, and a different paper. When considering whether or not to give advice or take ethical stands with students, tutors in writing centers must be attuned to circumstances that extend far beyond the narrow confines of the writing tutorial: What are the motivations and purposes and goals of the people involved—be they students, tutors, faculty, or administrators? What are the other emotional and social factors that might be influencing the perceptions which involved parties have of the situation? What are the legal, social, and ethical consequences of actually trying to influence a student's beliefs or feelings or arguments in doing a writing tutorial, and what are the consequences of NOT doing so? Is it the responsibility of tutors to allow students their own voices—the right to make their own ethical decisions whatever they might be and however "wrong" we might believe they are? Or, conversely, are there circumstances under which writing tutors should feel compelled to take an active ethical stand in response to student writing? Are tutors ever justified in seizing the "high moral ground" in a tutorial conference and telling students that their beliefs and/or approaches to a topic are unethical or immoral or just plain wrong?

Donald Stewart, in his 1988 article, "Collaborative Learning and Composition: Boon or Bane," clearly believes that tutors have the right and responsibility to take strong

ethical positions should the occasion merit. One of the difficulties he has with "collaborative writing people" and "social constructionists" (whom he lumps together) has specifically to do with the problem of ethics. His own words state the case most clearly:

Although I regret singling out a single individual, I take issue with some remarks that appear in Karen Burke LeFevre's *Invention as a Social Act*. They occur in the chapter entitled "Implications of a Social Perspective":

Or consider the case of an engineering student who tells a writing tutor that his advisor will not allow him to draw certain conclusions in his thesis because the agency sponsoring the research would discover that the work was essentially completed and would cut off funding. It would be beside the point for the tutor to suggest that this student try free-writing or tagmemics to come up with new material for his conclusion. (134)

Given the constraints in a situation like this, LeFevre asks:

What is a writing teacher or tutor to do? That is difficult to say. We can help writers to articulate their concerns and their perceptions of the constraints they face. We can talk about ways they might test the accuracy of their perceptions, or work around their constraints, or discuss problems with those responsible for creating and enforcing certain rules and policies. Writers and their supervisors may or may not try to change the status quo. What we cannot do is act as if these problems do not exist, as if people's jobs are not at stake, as if invention means asking the journalist's five W's and H without taking into account the very real implications that these choices have for writers in their social contexts. (134)

I cannot speak for others, but I find the moral relativism of such remarks disquieting. What, indeed, is a writing teacher to do in such a situation? I understand that in this case a degree is at stake. In another it will be a job. But the point is that in this example, those exercising the constraints are behaving illegally and immorally. They should be exposed. The student should write the report indicating that the research was complete. If that report is suppressed by those protecting government grant money and, I hasten to add, exploiting taxpayers, the student should appeal it all the way to the president of his university and if he finds no satisfaction there, he should take his major professor to court. This is a humanistic dilemma. Does one choose the ethically right or the morally expedient course of action? (73-74)

Stewart's example is a good one, but it has only limited application given the nature of ethical dilemmas that tutors are likely to face in real-world situations. Cases of outright fraud such as this one are rarely seen or revealed in writing tutorials, and fraud is a kind of unethical behavior that has monetary consequences and, therefore, clearly outlined ethical guidelines in the form of laws. The tutor has an externally enforced basis upon which to take an ethical stand, and the student has legal recourse should this stand, once adopted, be challenged.

But this is not generally the case with most of the ethical decisions practicing tutors must make in writing conferences. The behaviors and belief systems and writing practices that tutors must encounter and wrangle with—although they may occasionally seem as abhorrent as outright fraud—are far more slippery. The ethical questions which tutors face often have as much to do with whether the tutor has any right to take a firm stand against a student's opinions as they do with

cont. on page 12

National Writing Centers Association announces the first NWCA conference

April 13-16, 1994

New Orleans, LA, Double Tree Hotel

The First National Writing Centers Conference, held in conjunction with the South Central Writing Centers Association, will provide a highly interactive and innovative forum on issues facing writing centers in the twenty-first century. It will include concurrent sessions and catalyst sessions on a wide range of issues.

The conference is also scheduled to be carried on WCenter for those unable to attend. Network subscribers will be able to receive and respond to issues raised.

Part of the conference will be devoted to a series of six three-hour catalyst sessions exploring a series of specific issues of concern to writing center professionals. These catalyst sessions will work toward defining what writing centers are now and what they ought to be in the future. Session participants will develop responses and proposals to be presented during the final plenary session. Here's what the catalyst sessions will look like:

Writing Center Directors' Symposium
Chair: Muriel Harris
Purdue University

Writing Centers as Teaching Communities
Chair: Joan Mullin
Toledo University

Writing Centers as Electronic Communities
Chair: Bob Child
Purdue University

Writing Centers as Research Communities
Chair: Nancy Grimm
Michigan Tech University

Writing Centers as Administrative Communities
Chair: Jeanne Simpson
Eastern Illinois University

Concluding Plenary Session: Where do we go from here?
Chair: Christina Murphy
Texas Christian University

Other presentations: Topics for concurrent sessions will be drawn from proposals received. Here's a sampling of what else is planned:

Panel of past presidents: Chair: Lady Falls Brown, Texas Tech University

Poster sessions: Participants will be able to display their research and to network.

Topical lunches: Participants can discuss issues with writing center notables over lunch.

Registration fees: \$80 pre-registration (by February 15) and \$100 on-site; \$40 for student pre-registration and \$50 on-site.

Call for papers: Proposals will be accepted for papers (20 minutes), panels (3 speakers/15 minutes each), round tables (5 speakers/10 minutes each), dialogue sessions (2 opposing speakers), and poster sessions.

If you live east of the Mississippi, send proposals to Byron Stay, Department of Rhetoric and Writing, Mount St. Mary's College, Emmitsburg, MD 21727, (301) 447-5367, (301) 447-5755 (fax), e-mail: Stay@Msmary.edu

If you live west of the Mississippi, send proposals to Ray Wallace, Department of Language and Communications, Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, LA 71457, (318) 357-6272, (318) 357-5942 (fax), e-mail: Wallace@Alpha.nsula.edu

Steering Committee: Byron Stay, Co-chair, Mount St. Mary's College (MD); Ray Wallace, Co-chair, Northwestern State University (LA); Eric Hobson, St. Louis College of Pharmacy; Jim McDonald, University of Southwestern Louisiana; Joan Mullin, Toledo University.

Call for voices to join the Writing Center Directors' Symposium at the NWCA Conference

The description of the National Writing Centers Association conference on this page lists six three-hour catalyst sessions, and chairs of some of those sessions will be calling for proposals. One of these calls, included here, is to join the Writing Center Directors' Symposium. You are invited to include your voice in this catalyst session whether or not you plan to attend the conference.

The purpose of the Writing Center Directors' Symposium, to be held on Wednesday, April 13, is to identify current issues relevant to writing centers, to evaluate them, and to propose courses of action. During the three-hour session, there will be opportunities for five-minute presentations to identify various issues, and there will also be small group discussions of specific issues.

If you have an issue, problem, or concern for this symposium to address, you can enter the discussion whether or not you attend. To do this, please send for a response form to fill out. If you attend the conference, you may also want to be one of the presenters, the session recorder, or a small group discussion leader, along with having your written response included in one of the small group sessions. If you cannot attend the conference, your written response will be the means for your voice to be present because it will be given to one of the small group leaders for the discussion of that issue.

To help identify issues and/or to offer your services as a presenter, small group discussion leader, or session recorder, please send for a response form that you can fill out. Send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: Muriel Harris, English Dept., Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356. Deadline for returning the completed form to Muriel Harris is March 1, 1994.

Tutors' Column

cont. from page 13

of my own expectations. I came to realize many things, mainly that my own experiences with writing and tutoring are not universal. In other words, not every student has harrowing experiences with writing, not every tutoring session will be earth shattering, and so on. After realizing that my own experiences with tutoring are unique unto myself, you may wonder if I'm disillusioned, maybe even bitter: not the least bit. Although different from my original expectations, tutoring has turned out to be a rewarding and satisfying experience. I realized that each student progresses at a different rate, but nonetheless progresses. I learned to celebrate, not only "revolutionary" changes in their writing, but the smaller ones too, like being able to formulate a thesis, or to use transitional words, or even to use commas correctly. These are the things that kept me going. Moreover, I came to realize that putting any self-glorifying expectations on the tutoring experience, let alone on the tutees, is in itself bad. Wanting to play hero is sure to lead to disappointment. Instead what we should always keep in mind is that we may not necessarily reap the harvest of all 'A' writers, but we may be planting the seeds for future ones.

Helen Woo
Peer Tutor
University of California
Berkeley, CA

(Editor's note: This essay was a winner of the Martha Maxwell Contest for Writing Tutors, 1991.)

Ethics

(cont. from page 10)

whether the student's opinions are right or wrong in and of themselves. The slippery nature of this dilemma—which I like to think of a consistent tension between the need to intercede and the need to remain detached in a tutorial conference—is an interesting phenomenon, one that, I think, highlights the highly situated nature of conferences, tutors, students, and contexts. Different tutors will draw their lines in the sand in different places and for different reasons. And perhaps that is the way it should be.

In my next few columns, I will illustrate the perplexing problem of how to decide when (or whether) to take an ethical stance in a writing conference by offering several hypothetical scenarios for your consideration and commentary.

Michael Pemberton
University of Illinois
Champaign-Urbana, Illinois

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Stewart, Donald C. "Collaborative Learning and Composition: Boon or Bane?" *Rhetoric Review* 7 (1988): 58-83.

New from NCTE

Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color. By Victor Villanueva, Jr. Urbana: NCTE, 1993. 151 pages, paperbound. Price: \$16.95; NCTE members, \$12.95. (Order from NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Stock No. 03774-0015.)

The book, written by a professor of rhetoric, "presents a compelling look at how racism works to inhibit academic achievement by limiting academic opportunities." Villanueva includes stories of his own life as well as "an examination of research and popular thought on language use, literacy, and intelligence among people of color." Villanueva's stories move from Brooklyn where he was a high school drop out to his Ph.D. in literature and an academic career in which he has achieved success but, as he notes, is still treated like an outsider. Along the way he presents, among other discussions, his objections to English Only legislation as well as numerous real-life instances of language-based discrimination.

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations (WCAs)

February 4: South Carolina Writing Centers Association, in Columbia, SC
Contact: Glenn James, Midlands Tech. P.O. Box 2408, Columbia, SC 29202

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, Calvert Hall College, 8102 La Salle Rd., Baltimore, MD 21286

March 5: New England Writing Centers Association, in Andover, MA
Contact: Kathleen Shine Cain, Writing Center, Merrimack College, North Andover, MA 01845

April 13-16: National Writing Centers Association, in New Orleans, LA
Contact: Ray Wallace, Dept. of Language and Communications; Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, LA 71457 (318-357-6272) or Byron Stay, Dept. of Rhetoric and Writing, Mount St. Mary's College, Emmitsburg, MD 21727 (301-447-5367)

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

Expectations of a tutor

I remember how I first learned about tutoring at the Learning Skills Center. It was at the end of my junior year, when I was walking on campus and somebody handed me a pink flyer. I was about to toss it, except when I saw "tutor for *credit*" I thought it might be interesting. I was, after all, looking for a three-unit class. However, when I thought about it, I realized I couldn't get committed to something this big just for the units, and I sought to find more meaningful reasons to be a writing tutor. As I reflected, I came upon memories of my own nightmarish experiences in my first freshman composition class. I remembered how painful it was to write an essay; each word was a struggle. Only until my next English composition class was I able to really begin to write. This was largely due to the learning dynamics between myself and my own writing tutor. Thus I arrived at two very personal and interrelated reasons for becoming a writing tutor: I knew first-hand how downright painful English 1A (or Subject A or Asian American Studies 2A, etc.) can be, and hopefully, because of my own struggles, I would be able to relate with some degree of compassion to my tutees. I also saw myself as playing a sort of "Florence Nightingale" role to those wounded English composition students, healing their paper cuts, not with another stinging solution of grammar, but with a soothing ointment of understanding writing, not just fixing it.

Before going into that pivotal period in my own writing, when I was at the receiving end of tutoring, I would like to address my first reason for going into tutoring (understanding the frustrations of the tutee) by giving you some background into my own experiences as a first semester freshman in English. I usually call this experience "The Nightmare." I suppose it started after I handed in what I thought was the most brilliant, best piece of writing I had ever done. That "brilliant" piece of work got a failing grade. I remember getting the paper back in a required personal conference with the instructor. When she told me that basically she didn't

understand a word I said, I literally thought she was talking to someone else. (I turned around to see if there was someone behind me.) Her comments that day, and throughout the semester, were mostly mechanical, and corrections were made sentence to sentence, not addressing the essay as a whole.

Okay, I thought, this was my first failure, but it was also only my first essay. But things did not change much after that: as a matter of fact they got worse. As I continued to receive failing grades, I progressively lost self-esteem because I thought writing reflected me as a person, not just as a writer. I got more and more discouraged as I tried harder and harder to make everything come out mechanically correct, trying never to use the passive verb "to be," and trying to use "one in which" as much as possible. The next paper made me literally delirious. I had a fever, and after a night of trying to define "family" as it is perceived in modern society, I was much more confused than when I had first begun. That night I had a nightmare about my English class and the paper topic: I was on a game show, in which the bonus question was something like "What is the definition of family?" For the life of me I just couldn't get the right answer. The game show host was my English teacher, and she just wouldn't stop laughing. Experiences like this continued throughout the semester. By the end I felt like I was very much in a deep pit of literary despair.

Thus because of my own nightmarish experiences as novice writer, I hoped I would be able to add a bit of understanding to the frustrated writer. I realize that many students perceive writing as not only putting their "reputation" as writers at stake, but rather their "reputation" as thinking, intelligent individuals. I realize that failing grades on papers often can become blows to self-esteem, and enough of these blows can leave a student floored, after which it is very difficult to get up. Therefore, I think just the awareness of the seriousness and intensity writing can play in a tutee's life can help a

tutor become less of a distanced evaluator and more of an understanding, sometimes even sympathetic, writing companion.

Two semesters after "The Nightmare" I found myself sitting in another English composition class. But things would be different this semester; I would get myself a tutor. The tutor I ended up with did not merely change "things" in my writing, but rather we worked together to set my writing straight. We threw out all mechanics of writing and looked at writing as a process. (I did not even know writing *was* a process). I did not need another grammar lesson to evaluate syntax or diction; what I needed was a serious attitude change. I began to see that my writing had been a selfish and rude affair because I was entirely unaware of the reader's presence. I was mostly writing for myself; the reader just happened to be there. I finally realized that writing is not a private conversation with myself or simply a list of ideas, but is an earnest attempt to communicate with another human being. I also saw that thinking well is intricately and inseparably tied to writing well. After I understood the issues I was discussing, how each idea fit with other ones, what the flow of my argument was, only then could I begin to intelligently communicate with the reader. Perhaps most significant is that writing actually began to be *fun*. The point is that the role my tutor played was truly pivotal, if not the genesis, of my road to becoming a writer. Thus this concludes my second reason for becoming a writing tutor, that maybe I too could facilitate a "revolution" in a student's understanding of writing. I would offer not only sympathy, but real advice about the proper attitude of a writer, explain how writing well is thinking well, present writing as a process, not just putting words on paper. In other words, when I got through with my tutees they would never look at writing the same way again.

After a semester at the Learning Skills Center I am able to better examine the reality

(Cont. on page 12)

Book Review

Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies. Eds. Joyce A. Kinkead and Jeanette G. Harris. Urbana: NCTE, 1993. 274 pages, paperbound. Price: \$24.95; NCTE members: \$17.95. (Stock No. 58684-0015) (Order from NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.)

A call went out over the net: "Wanna review a book?" Larry Beason and I responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to review the latest NCTE publication on writing centers, *Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies*. Larry is in the process of revamping the writing center at Eastern Washington State University and needed some practical advice on the day-to-day operation of a writing center. I, on the other hand, am up to my elbows in research on writing centers for my own dissertation. Muriel Harris thought that our different perspectives might make for interesting, yet complementary, reviews. After exchanging early drafts of our reviews, Larry and I decided she was right. We hope you agree. •Elizabeth H. Boquet

• Reviewed by Larry Beason, Eastern Washington University
(Cheney, WA)

I read this collection of essays with a great deal of self-interest. The writing center at my campus is undergoing a drastic change; instead of being housed in the English Department and working almost exclusively with freshman composition students, our new center will be a university-funded facility assisting our entire student and faculty population. Like most composition specialists, I am familiar with writing centers and the relevant literature but am not a specialist in this area. I needed advice not only with setting up a sound theoretical grounding but also with the day-to-day logistics of running a center. I immersed myself in Kinkead and Harris's book. No, there is no one model for a center—no single template to use as we struggled with the demands of our specific context. As the editors suggest, each center has to find the vision and procedures most appropriate for it. Nonetheless, this book has proven to be an extremely valuable resource as we enhance our center, and I suspect it will continue to be valuable long after we complete our transition.

One helpful feature concerns the range of writing centers profiled in the book: twelve centers, each having a unique identity and set of operations. It's not the range of centers *per se* that is useful. Rather, it is the fact that we have the opportunity to look at twelve different situations and twelve different responses to the challenge of helping people with their writing needs. Each profile in the book is written by someone significantly involved with a center and in a position to understand how context affects—and is affected by—a center.

For someone needing pragmatic information about operating a center, another strength of the book is the detailed explanation of how each center is set up and how it operates. Even without the diagrams providing the physical layouts of the centers, it is easy to envision each writing center and its "typical" day (almost every contributor to the book is reluctant to say any two days are really alike). Most of the profiles are devoted to describing features such as the clientele, the selection and training of tutors, types of services available, and record keeping. Rarely does any selection omit key information. (Since we all struggle with budget crunches, I found myself wishing more contributors would divulge their budgets, but clearly such information can become dated quickly and changes from year to year for even the most stable center.)

• Reviewed by Elizabeth H. Boquet, Indiana University of
Pennsylvania (Indiana, PA)

In this new collection edited by Joyce A. Kinkead and Jeanette G. Harris, the editors sought diversity and they achieved it, soliciting articles from writing center directors at two-year and four-year institutions, private schools and open-admissions colleges, land-grant universities and major research institutions, to list a few. As Kinkead and Harris point out in the introduction, the book is intended to serve several purposes, ranging from providing "knowledge of what exists" for newcomers to the field to offering all writing center personnel "solutions to common problems as well as plans that have already been implemented and tested" (xvii).

The bird's eye view of writing centers that this book provides makes it an invaluable resource manual. Mired as I am in dissertation research on the history, theory and practices of writing centers, I find myself continually referring to the articles for information on the history, services, and administration of these particular centers. The reader-friendly layout of the chapters makes locating such information a fairly simple task. Nowhere else have I found such a thorough description of facilities like Purdue's Writing Lab, a writing center which, as we all know, has had a profound impact on the field, mainly due to the efforts of its director, Muriel ("Mickey") Harris, who wrote the lead essay in the book.

Perhaps the most provocative essay in the book is Gail Okawa's "Redefining Authority: Multicultural Students and Tutors at the Educational Opportunity Program Writing Center at the University of Washington." By far the most political piece in the collection, Okawa's essay deals with critical pedagogical issues, painting a picture of a writing center that recognizes its position as a site of cultural struggle within the university. When Okawa explains the underlying philosophy of the tutoring taking place in the EOP, she writes, "I learned that working with ethnic minority and nontraditional students in a writing context does not raise simply an academic issue of text ownership, that is who has ownership of a text being written? Rather, it raises a critical social and political issue of identity and authority, that is, who has the right to control ownership of a text? Who has the right to write in the academy?" (171). Okawa, her colleagues, and the tutors at the Writing Center demonstrated their commitment to these issues not only by

Beason review (cont.)

Granted, some readers might find some details—such as who makes the coffee in the morning or who fills out which form—a bit tedious if the book is read cover-to-cover. The editors have made the book accessible, so it is not necessary to read through the almost 300 pages of text searching for information on specific topics. For example, the editors provide an extremely thorough table of contents that breaks each case study into anywhere from seven to thirteen major headings, usually with several subheadings as well. Each case study follows a similar format (history, physical description, chronology of a typical day, clientele, tutors, major services, and administration), again making it easy to find needed information and know what to expect. *Writing Centers in Context* is blessed with a sensibly constructed index of some fifteen pages (indexes of any length are all too rare in edited collections). The editors have even made it easy to access the contributors by including phone numbers and mailing addresses, as well as FAX numbers and e-mail addresses for some contributors.

It is important for writing center literature to avoid becoming just a series of "how to" articles. The contributors' emphasis on the practical certainly does not mean that the book is simply an equivalent to the what-to-do-on-Monday discussions that dominate some educational texts. Each center described in this book is grounded in its own theoretical stance toward writing, learning, and teaching.

As noted, a strength of this book is that it profiles diverse approaches to writing centers, but one concern I have is that the focus on differences may undermine the practical utility of this book. In the introductory and closing sections, the editors stress the differences among these centers and the contextual factors that shape their identity. Joyce Kinkead states that "it is impossible to make generalizations about writing centers" (232). Theoretically speaking, her claim is reasonable. However, I was surprised how much I could learn from reading the description of each center—whether it was located in a community college or an ivy league institution. Centers may share far more than we realize. Linda Simon, for example, explains that her center deals with "students who have many of the same problems that undergraduates have elsewhere: inability to focus an essay, timidity in stating a thesis, trouble organizing ideas, strange conceptions about what is expected of them stylistically, inexperience in thinking critically" (115). This description indeed fits more than a few college students around the nation—not just the Harvard students whom Simon had in mind. The editors do not suggest, of course, that readers should examine only the one case study that most closely reflects their academic context, but I am not sure that it is clear just how useful each contribution can be for any writing center. When all is said and done, virtually all writing centers operate under the assumption that a one-on-one tutorial approach is at the heart of what they do, and this commonality means there is much we can learn from one another. I doubt the editors would disagree with what I am saying (certainly, they would not have spent years putting this collection together unless they thought we all could learn from these twelve profiles). Still, we might more easily appreciate all that this book has to offer if it were made clearer that we should not overlook the values and strategies that we share regardless of our different situations.

The editors and contributors supply us with a much needed resource that should generate useful discussions about the theory and practices of writing centers. As the authors intended, this collection demonstrates that there is no "ideal" writing center, but there are many centers that have been successful because they have responded effectively to the demands of the schools in which they operate.

Boquet review (cont.)

recognizing the need to talk about them, but also by acting on their beliefs. By 1989-90, the staff consisted of many tutors who had once been students in the Educational Opportunity Program and who represented a variety of cultural and ethnic minorities.

These tutors' voices, in the form of journal entries, run throughout the text. Such a dialogic approach has serious implications for our field. As Alice Gillam notes in "Writing Center Ecology: A Bakhtinian Perspective," "Voices of others—past and current teachers, friends, parents, other texts—intrude, and boundaries between the language of the writer, reader, and text blur" (3). If we are to embrace an increasingly dialogic model for tutoring in our centers, then we must acknowledge the dialogic nature of our own writing as well. In Okawa's essay, we hear the voices of her tutors when she writes. In their voices, we learn of their students and of the reciprocity inherent in the tutor-tutee relationship, as George, a tutor, illustrates so nicely when he recalls his first writing conference with an African-American student. His student chose to write about "an aunt who ostensibly did not appear remarkable but, through the eyes of this student, she was a tower of strength, optimism and love. What [he] was struck and moved by was this young girl's natural respect for charity, integrity and humor, all embodied by her aunt" (178). Voices upon voices, stories upon stories, layers upon layers making meaning as we write.

Recently, we have experienced a renewed interest in the role of narrative in educational research. This collection seems to support that trend. While calling themselves case studies, these essays blur the boundaries between naturalistic inquiry and storytelling, much to this reader's delight. In this way, these writers support Kathy Carter's assertion that "the case idea is certainly consistent with the emphasis on the storied nature of teachers' knowledge and on the power of stories to represent action and event structures" (10).

By sharing our stories, we help to create event-structured knowledge, thereby making sense of our own experiences and helping others to make sense of theirs. The editors of this collection unfortunately undercut the power of narrative to generate such knowledge when they perpetuate the all-too-common perception that we cannot generalize about our writing centers, despite the existence of publications like the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal*, of organizations like the National Writing Centers Association, and of networks like the Writing Center Bulletin Board. In the epilogue, Kinkead writes unequivocally, "[I]t is impossible to make generalizations about writing centers" (232). However, according to her first paragraph, her purpose in the epilogue is to identify "some common threads" (227). Certainly, writing centers, like most academic services, differ according to their institutional contexts. This book illustrates that point quite nicely. What it does best, perhaps, is what it claims cannot be done: It enables us to begin to see ourselves as a community of scholars, working in different settings, under different circumstances, toward a common goal.

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N E W S L E T T E R

Muriel Harris, editor
Department of English
Purdue University
1356 Heavilon Hall
West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356

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