

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 18, Number 7

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

March, 1994

...FROM THE EDITOR...

Those of you who are connected to the electronic discussion group, WCenter, are familiar with the wit and sometimes downright silliness of "Ask Carl" messages which help us all keep our sanity and good humor. Carl has graciously consented (or been arm-wrestled into) sharing his "Ask Carl" column with all newsletter readers. So we happily announce the beginning of a new column, "Ask Carl," which will run until Carl deserts us, gets a pay raise, or decides to take his reader comments seriously.

And another WCenter-related benefit for newsletter readers has been our "Voices from the Net" columns, Eric Crump's excerpts of WCenter discussions of various topics. If you are subscribed to WCenter, you've read the forecast of WCenter's future difficulties as explained by Fred Kemp, who manages the WCenter list. The list has continued only because of Fred Kemp's efforts, but it will soon require an investment of institutional support in order to continue.

If you find Eric Crump's columns useful, enjoy the humor of "Ask Carl," and read WCenter postings, you can support the smooth continuation of WCenter by writing to Wendell Aycock, English, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-3081. Let him know that WCenter is an important contribution to the profession and is worth continuing. A brief note on your institutional letterhead paper will be a major help as well as a show of support.

• Muriel Harris, editor

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Things your mentor never told you: Discovering writing lab identity in the institutional environment

Directors of writing labs may struggle to define the identity of their labs much like adolescents in search of who they are. Young adults define themselves in part by understanding their places within the systems of family and community. Similarly, writing lab directors new to the job, or new to an institution, can better understand their responsibilities and the possibilities of their labs by determining their places within their institutions. As adolescents must go through the sometimes painful process of self-definition by themselves, the process for the writing lab administrator is also one of individual discovery, not a heuristic made available to students of composition and rhetoric in graduate school. The three stages of that process outlined here reflect not only my own experience as a first-time writing lab director, but also what I learned at a regional conference about the experiences of other lab administrators.

Writing professionals who accept positions as writing lab directors may be taking a first job, transferring to a new school, or es-

establishing labs at institutions where they already teach. They may be moving into a kind of writing lab different from what they have previously known or establishing a lab with no experience whatsoever in a writing lab. Because the services writing labs provide are based on the needs of the communities they serve, directors need to find the proper fit between the writing lab and the community; that is, they need to define the identity of the writing lab at that particular educational institution. The new director needs to know who the lab serves and what kinds of services it provides. For example, does the lab offer tutorials only, or computer services, too? If both, what are its priorities? Because the lab can only provide the services it has the resources to provide, the new director must explore what those resources are—what funding and staffing are available, and what other demands are placed on the director as a resource.

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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 a self-addressed envelope with return postage 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.

Writing lab directors, of course, learn much that is essential about the lab's functions from their professional training. Our graduate training in rhetoric is, of course, necessary for us to know what to teach in tutorials and what we want our tutors to do. Writing lab directors must often learn on their own, however, such management aspects of the job as how to screen, hire, train, communicate with, and reward tutors. It is also through experience rather than in the classroom that we learn how to communicate with members of the academic community—administrators, teachers, and students—about the writing lab and what it does or how to work within the rhythms of the fiscal year. No one can teach us how to serve a particular population and help tutors deal with those clients or how to juggle lab responsibilities with other teaching, advising and administrative duties. Just as adolescents learn their identities partly through their upbringing, but largely through experience, writing lab directors learn their identities partly through training, but largely through on-the-job experience at particular schools.

One lesson that comes from experience rather than from professional training is the extreme variations in writing labs, differences that go far beyond whether we call ourselves "labs" or "centers." At the heart of these differences are the resources allocated to the writing lab. One school's funding may be meager or nonexistent, while at a large state university, tens of thousands of dollars may be allocated to the lab. Physical space also varies: the writing lab at one state university branch is a part of a classroom, weekday afternoons, while at another school, several rooms are furnished for one-to-one discussions of writing. The services that writing labs are expected to provide are equally varied. Writing tutorials may be conducted in a combined reading and learning center or in a lab for both computer use and tutorials. Finally, the people who staff the lab vary greatly from one school to the next. Directing the lab may be the sole responsibility of a full-time faculty member, or the lab may be supervised by a graduate student or a full-time faculty member who has other teaching, advising, and administrative responsibilities. A director may be able to hire tutors who are graduate students or upper-division English majors, or she may rely on work-study students majoring in other disciplines.

Stage One: Accept what the writing lab is not.

Because the resources available to writing labs differ among educational institutions, the first step toward a firmer sense of identity may well be comprehending and accepting what the writing lab at one's school is *not*. It is easy for lab directors to be handicapped by comparisons of their labs to better-funded and established programs at the writing labs of other schools. The director of a center having limited resources at a community college may despair over the contrast between his lab and what seems to be the model lab at a nearby state university. The professional leaving a graduate program and writing lab at a large university to take a first job as writing lab director at a smaller college may find that the resources available to the lab may be entirely different in the new environment. For example, the writing lab I observed as a graduate student at a large state university was staffed mostly by doctoral students who worked in the lab in lieu of teaching a section of freshman composition. The lab had been in place for years and had an excellent record-keeping system with regular communications between the tutors and the composition teachers about what was taught in the tutorials. As a new writing lab director at a university approximately one-tenth the size of my alma mater, I at first assumed I could transfer my knowledge of the working of one writing lab to the other, but I quickly learned that the concept of the lab at the two schools was fundamentally different. With trained doctoral students who had teaching experience in freshman composition staffing the lab, tutorials had resembled additional composition classes for the lab's clients. The school's perception of my new lab was that it was a place where students—all undergraduate, and many not even English majors—helped other students. There was no system of evaluating and reporting on tutorial conferences in place.

The director's first response to the disparities she observes between the resources and visibility of her lab and others may be the inclination to give up, or at least to not attempt much. "After all," the director reasons, "We're not the University of ____, so what can I hope to accomplish?" Although to stop at this early stage would be to accept defeat, recognizing what our labs are not *is* a healthy

step toward identifying the lab's strengths. Directors need to get such comparisons out of their systems and face squarely that their situations may be far from ideal, compared to other writing labs they know.

Stage Two: Analyze the institution and how its characteristics affect the writing lab.

If, like John Bunyan's Pilgrim, directors can pass this potential Slough of Despond, they are then prepared to take the second step toward understanding their labs' identities: assessing the characteristics of the educational institution of which the lab is a part and determining how those characteristics affect the writing lab. The writing lab director new to an educational institution needs to ask some basic questions at this point: How does the school understand its purpose? What is the composition and size of the student body? What specialized programs are there? What is unique to the school? After analyzing the characteristics of the institution, the director is ready to consider how the school's characteristics affect the writing lab either positively or negatively. What are the constraints to be faced, and what are the strengths?

Analysis of the private four-year Jesuit liberal arts university at which I teach yielded two features that helped me grasp the writing lab's identity. First is the school's service orientation. The university is guided by a mission statement concluding with the following: "We hope that all our graduates will live creative, productive, and moral lives, seeking to fulfill their own aspirations and at the same time actively supporting the aspirations of others by a generous sharing of their gifts." Surveying student activities on campus, I identified seven service organizations that provide an opportunity for students to serve the university and the community at large. Even students carrying the heaviest loads, including honors students, devote time to volunteer projects. Another feature of the university that shapes the writing lab's identity and distinguishes it from the lab I had previously experienced is the financial aid system. During the previous academic year, approximately 400 students received aid in the form of federal work-study funds, which are granted only to freshmen. The Financial Aid Office policy is to encourage sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students to find work off-campus to get "real-

world" experience. Although volunteers are also recruited to work in the lab, it relies primarily for staffing on four federal work-study positions each semester. The writing lab is thus staffed largely by freshmen.

These two characteristics of the institution have distinct consequences for the writing lab, particularly with respect to the quality of the tutoring services we are able to provide. Acknowledging gratefully the useful services of the tutors, both paid and unpaid, I also recognize that university funding of the lab through the work-study program limits the improvement I can make in the quality of tutoring services. First, instead of tutors experienced in writing and teaching, I have freshmen whose writing strengths vary considerably applying for the lab's work-study positions. The training sessions I provide for the tutors can not substitute for the more intensive training in writing and the teaching of writing such as English graduate students experience. Second, trained freshman tutors can not return to the lab the next year because they are then required to work off-campus.

On the other hand, the student body's service orientation at the university definitely boosts the quality of services the writing lab can provide. Volunteer tutors spend a minimum of four hours each week in the lab and generally seem to be devoted to the work. Even the tutors who work in the lab to earn one credit and those who are paid for their services with work-study funds enjoy helping other students. It is gratifying to hear the tutors say so directly in our meetings, but they also express their commitment indirectly, in their anxiety over what they are not able to accomplish in tutorials with students. The tutors' conscientiousness about helping others leads to another positive effect of the students' service orientation I have observed: the tutors each semester develop a camaraderie and a sense of possession about the writing lab, which gives them pride in the services they provide.

Stage Three: Develop the writing lab's assets.

Understanding how the institution's characteristics affect the writing lab both positively and negatively, the director can then accept what cannot be changed about the school or the writing lab in the short term, such as administrative support, or can deter-

mine what may be changed over time, such as funding for the lab or allocation of space to it. More importantly, the director is then prepared to develop the lab's assets. Rather than being apologetic about what the lab cannot do, the director is better able to communicate to colleagues, students, and administrators what it *can* do. After defining the lab's identity, the director is also in a position to set realistic, achievable goals. For example, recognizing that the volunteer tutors are one of our strengths, I hope to build our volunteer staff by tapping teacher education students. Understanding that the lab is strengthened by providing both tutorials and computer services, I plan next year to document more rigorously computer usage so that we can make a case for purchasing another computer. Having analyzed the population our writing lab serves, I can improve tutoring services for our target population by helping tutors work with non-native speakers of the language, returning students, and students from professional schools who need help with particular kinds of assignments.

It is especially helpful throughout the process of defining the writing lab's identity to communicate with other people, both by reading sources such as the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and the *Writing Center Journal*, and by talking with people within and without our educational institutions. At my university, the tutors themselves produced excellent suggestions for improving volunteer participation during a staff brainstorming session. Conversations with other faculty members whose students use the lab have yielded information about their perceptions and expectations of the writing lab. Talking to other writing lab tutors and administrators at other schools in the region at an informal conference has provided useful, practical suggestions about how to improve our services, staffing, training, advertising, and funding. The conference also proved to participating writing lab tutors and directors that we are not isolated—that other writing lab staffs are working within constraints and trying to make the most of what they have. The director's individual search for the writing lab's identity ends, not in isolation, but in collaboration with other people who are committed to the success of writing labs at other institutions.

The benefits of taking the time to define the writing lab's identity are several: evaluat-

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Tutors aren't trained—they're educated: The need for composition theory

A recent call for papers on "tutor training" made us realize that the notion of "training" is inadequate in both perception and process. Tutors are students, not just hired hands. Our obligation is not merely to instruct them in necessary documentation, but also to educate them—in the best sense of the word.

That view is one of the founding premises for our upper-level undergraduate course, Composition Seminar/Practicum. (This course replaced Advanced Composition as the required advanced writing course for English majors.) The seminar format invites students to look at four broad concerns—invention, revision, style, and structure—supported by an extensive and current composition bibliography (ranging from Aristotle to Elbow). The only required readings are William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* and Thomas Reigstad and Donald McAndrew's *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences*. Students earn one of their four credit hours by tutoring in lower-level writing courses and/or in the Writing Lab. In addition to obligatory documenting of tutoring sessions, students keep annotated tutor journals.

Seven years of offering the course have led us to the following observations:

1. Initially, some of the best student writer/tutors are least aware of the writing process.

Often tutors in other programs are recommended because their writing products are good—not because they know the composing process. Just as a good scholar might not necessarily be a good teacher, a good student writer isn't necessarily a good tutor. For many good student writers, composing has been almost purely a mental process; the physical act of writing, like Mozart's, occurs only as a sort of transcription. However, few of us are Mozarts: students who put on a Beethoven persona will learn more about the writing process and their tutees' problems.

2. Writers/tutors often focus on tutees' lower order concerns (LOCs).

Tutors do this because in their own writing, they have intuitively taken care of higher order concerns (HOCs). In typical college writing experiences, they seldom if ever have to bring that knowledge to consciousness and discuss it, much less use it. These students' experiences with tutees frustrate them: "why don't they get it?" echoes through tutor journals and early discussions about tutoring.

3. Education includes training—and should include what validates training.

Tutoring is more than paper-shuffling. Sometimes our least successful tutors are very thorough in their reporting, but they need to realize that documentation of tutoring activity is the means, not the end. Just as a student may excel in grammar drills without becoming a good writer, a tutor may show perfect recordkeeping without either knowing or demonstrating the values of good tutoring. Tutors need to discover what drives the strategies and tactics suggested to them in class and readings. Training and education are not two separate entities.

4. Writers' most important concerns are epistemological, not merely technical.

True, tutors need to document for the usual academic reasons—to notify referring instructors, to log hours for payment, etc. But in the seminar tutors are also required to reflect and write in their journals, making connections between relevant readings from their sourcelist, classroom discussions about tutoring, and tutoring sessions. Thus, tutors bridge theory and practice—a gap too often left unbridged in product-oriented education. Students can also make journal entries on learning experiences outside direct tutoring sessions—consulting with their own instructors, for example, or giving classmates advice about composition problems. Our best tutors show in their journals that a variety of learning experiences can offer the potential for learning about tutoring and writing *for themselves*.

5. Theory is both ideas and new practices.

Unless students expand their repertoire to include new writing contexts and audiences, then some valuable practice will remain merely theoretical to them—something to be read about but not used. Through this wider notion of "theory," students will come to discover their own repertoire (and limits) of tutoring tricks. Reigstad and McAndrews' use of the term "training" also includes this notion of theory:

[T]utors need to understand that writing is a recursive process.... [They need to] learn about the composing process ... by finding out what scholars and researchers say about composing ... and by experiencing the composing process firsthand (9).

Theory and practice have powerful implications for each other, for example, the way that formal structures and cognitive processes relate to each other. When a writer realizes that comparison/contrast is an essential thought pattern—not just an essay form—s/he will affirm Zinsser's saying that "clear thinking becomes clear writing" (9).

6. Only theory makes higher order concerns (HOCs) visible and discussible.

Tutors, even good ones, can be fooled by top-down, sentence-by-sentence fluency—the algorithmic view of writing that concentrates on tactics of coherence and transition. The result can be a smooth surface which reads well but finally has neither direction nor structure. By offering or even forcing heuristic options (such as freewriting or clustering) on writers, tutors can see underlying problems. Because use of heuristics does not generate a smooth surface from the start, student writers have to take greater ownership of writing design, purpose and audience analysis. Their understanding of HOCs becomes organic and active, a concern for the rhetorical life of the writing rather than just style or correctness.

7. Theory may corroborate "incorrect" but useful intuitions about writing.

A theoretical context forces students to articulate their thoughts about the writing process and their private habits, for example, writing the outline after the paper. They can acknowledge that such "incorrect" practices may be useful—and may be more epistemologically valuable than the methods they were taught to use. In this instance, writing an outline after the paper may become a structure check which leads the student to revise more globally and effectively.

8. Theory allows tutors a wider range of diagnoses of background problems.

Consider the common but not handbook-related concerns tutors typically encounter:

- The tutee's failure to understand the assignment, audience, or purpose beyond "getting done."
- The algorithmic/heuristic balance, that is, how much control the student has over the design, purpose or originality of a paper.
- The need for "willing suspension of disbelief" that good writers use to overcome needless self-censure and other kinds of writer's block.
- Personal problems and hidden agendas, such as anxiety or hostility toward the instructor.
- Poor teaching or assignment design.

For the student writer, William Stafford's claim that "you must revise your life" is not casual advice. Many acts of writing involve concerns other than those the instructor anticipates: writing anxiety, self-awareness, risk taking, to name a few. Composition theory derives from many disciplines—cognitive psychology, sociology, linguistics, among others—and it can help tutors (and their tutees) to understand that these are valid concerns in the writing process and that they can be dealt with productively.

9. Only theory makes the distinction between preventive maintenance and repair, between

diagnosis and repair.

The descriptive-not-prescriptive emphasis in pedagogy since Mina Shaughnessy allows informed tutors to be more supportive—to say "when you do it this way, it's more likely to reach your reader" instead of saying "this is x, it's wrong." Tutoring grounded in theory also offers powerful evidence that some writing behaviors are less productive (or more inhibiting) than others—what Michael Rose calls "high-blocking" behaviors. Thus, a tutor can shift the emphasis from avoiding error to creating meaning.

10. Theory can allow a writer/tutor to generate an unlimited number of tactics and responses, rather than memorize a limited few.

The analogy to Noam Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar comes to mind: just as a finite number of rules can generate an infinite number of sentences, so also can a basic grasp of theoretical principles generate a wide range of practical responses. A reader in theory will know soon enough that writing and tutoring are conversations open to options, rather than rules to follow and words to check.

This is not to say that everything about theory-based tutoring is good: our seminar students groan when they see the length of our selective booklist—ten pages and growing. However, its length (as well as its diversity) may reinforce the sentiment of a Flannery O'Connor quotation which we always place on the cover of the syllabus: "one thing that is always with the writer—no matter how long he has written or how good he is—is the continuing process of learning how to write" (83). We're still learning, too.

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Things Your Mentor Never Told You

Continued from page 3

ing the unique characteristics of the university and lab, it is easier to chart a realistic course for the lab's future, to make the most of resources and strengths, and to communicate positively about the writing lab to the academic community. It is true that no one can teach us this process. We can be trained as writing professionals, but then we are always on our own to adapt that training to the teaching and administrative situations in which we find ourselves. Understanding our labs' identities is not the end, for there will always be features of our centers that we wish to change within the constraints we have identified. As in the growth of individuals toward maturity, however, knowing who we are puts us in a position of strength to develop what we do well.

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WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Confronting Controversy and Practicing Politics

Over the last two columns, I've presented you with two sets of scenarios, each having four variations on a central theme. Over the next two columns, I will discuss the schemes I used to shape these scenarios and the cases within them. It was not my intention that these scenarios and cases represent the full range of student responses that the described assignments or contexts might elicit, but I think that these cases, some of whose situational features can be contrasted explicitly and in relatively well-focused ways, highlight a fairly clear set of ethical questions about tutoring theory and tutorial practice. As you will no doubt see, when I talk about each of these scenarios, much of what I do is to ask questions. In later columns, I will present some of the answers that you, the readers, have offered in response.

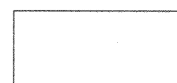
The first set of cases, in what I call the "Controversial Issue" scenario, was designed to illustrate a range of political and emotional stances that might be brought to a writing conference by students who were asked to write an argumentative, research-based paper about a current controversial issue. In the scenario I offered (and each of the cases within it), all four students chose to write about affirmative action, and their political/emotional stances fell, roughly, into the categories illustrated by the following chart:

In two of the cases—the first and last—the students expressed strong, angry feelings, not just about affirmative action but also about their instructors' potential response to the papers' arguments. In case one, the student's paper took a reactionary political stance, claiming that affirmative action was a joke because blacks and other minority students were basically inferior and shouldn't be given any special privileges. In case four, the student's paper took a radical political stance, arguing that affirmative action was thoroughly inadequate restitution for centuries of discrimination. This student affirmed, in fact, that "white people should be paying through the nose" for what they had done. In the other two cases—numbers two and three—the papers' rhetoric was less strident and the political positions somewhat more moderate, but the students had made a questionable rhetorical decision. Both students opted to write papers which were geared for instructor approval rather than being expressions of their actual beliefs. The questions I posed for this set of four cases were (1) What sort of ethical stance (if any) should tutors take in these scenarios? (2) Would you treat any of these cases differently from the others, and if so, why?

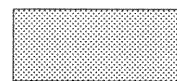
This scenario, I think, asks tutors to confront both their political biases and their instructional roles as writing center tutors. In

particular, this set of cases asks: To what degree should tutors be willing to preserve their "detachment" from students, student texts, and a student's political positions? If, as some of us might feel, the racist position held by Student One deserves to be confronted in a tutorial, why do we feel this, and how exactly should it be confronted? Are we challenging this position on moral grounds and an appeal to some "higher" ethical stance, or are we challenging it merely because it does not conform with our own political beliefs? If we choose to address the political content in this paper, then how should we position ourselves? Should we challenge the student directly and take issue with the "immorality" of racism? Should we challenge the student indirectly by playing the devil's advocate and asking him to respond to possible counterarguments? Or should we challenge him subtly by raising the question of tone, rhetorical goals, and possible audience response? And what about Student Four? Would those who argue for confrontation with Student One feel a similar need to be confrontational with him? If not, then why not? Are not both political positions equally extreme? If we do feel the need to be confrontational with either one (or both) of these students, then to what extent are we in danger of trying to co-opt their texts and shape their arguments into our own image of "acceptable" papers?

Case #1	Strong, Angry Feelings Reactionary Political Stance
Case #2	Contradictory Feelings Conservative Political Stance
Case #3	Contradictory Feelings Liberal Political Stance
Case #4	Strong, Angry Feelings Radical Political Stance



= "Moderate" positions
but conflicting
convictions



= "Extremist" positions
but strong convictions

These questions are also germane, I think, to a consideration of Students Two and Three. Both of these students make conscious choices to write papers that will please their instructors (or so they think) rather than themselves. Do tutors have a responsibility or an obligation or even a right to subvert that choice? And what about the political positions that are being espoused by these students? Are they any less worthy of confrontation and challenge merely because we tend to think of them as "mainstream"? How likely is it that tutors will feel the need to take issue with a paper whose arguments conform to their own beliefs? Will tutors in favor of affirmative action, for example, be as quick to challenge a student whose position is in accordance with their own as they would be to confront a student who thinks affirmative action is a mistake?

Do any differences in the way we would approach these four cases present a "problem" for tutors and tutor-training, or are they merely a reflection of the fact that we are all human beings who behave in ways that conform with our own beliefs? To put this question in another way, are we, as tutors, obligated to be dispassionate advisors, stifling our personal reactions to the political and, perhaps, ethical content in student papers no matter how divergent that content may be from our own views, or is it our responsibility to be honest and up-front with students about our ethics, our politics, and our biases and accept the fact that our instructional practices will always be inflected by our own beliefs?

I realize as I ask this last question that I am, perhaps, setting up a false dilemma. I suspect that there is a middle ground between, say, a Mr. Spock attitude on the one hand and a Rush Limbaugh/Howard Stern (pick your favorite demagogue) attitude on the other. But I also believe it is frequently useful to consider writing center ethics in terms of the oppositional forces that not only shape our personal ethics but also define the parameters of writing center theory and practice. Sometimes, I think, the only way to make an ethical choice is by deciding which of two unrealistically extreme options is the Lady and which is the Tiger.

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Writing without teachers

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with tutors coordinating the peer group critiques, substantive peer commentary emerges in an atmosphere of trust and community. In terms of time, one class period is sufficient for all members of each group to give and receive feedback, far less time than is required for teacher-student conferencing.

And the advantages of peer critique over teacher critique are well known. Students often respond more positively to peer opinion. As a student put it, "The group pointed out my errors, and it made me feel a lot better than having a professor do it. In a way made me feel more relaxed when I wrote something." Another student's evaluation of group work characterizes the class's reaction to the process at the end of the semester and also captures what we think is the essence of successful peer group methodology:

Our sessions in the lab have been most helpful to me. We get to hear everyone else's point of view on our paper and the groups are small. The individuality is an important factor, along with the criticism from fellow peers. My group partners have let me know what needs to be added or deleted. Also hearing the work of others gives me ideas to present on my own, but I can get a feel of a different point of view from someone else. I can now see things that other people saw that I hadn't before.

Tutor response has been equally as positive. In journal entries written by tutors after peer group meetings, patterns of growth and development in the writing community emerged again and again. The following comments, which illustrate these patterns, were recorded over a three month period by one of our tutors during her work with the same group each week:

February 16—After a few group sessions had taken place and a group identity was established, I found that the students in my group were working with each other on their own incentive with the next assignment, while I was conferencing with one of the other group members—this was gratifying. Eavesdropping, I heard comments like: "Hey, what do you think of my paper so far?", "Why don't you read this for me? I don't think it sounds quite right," and "So's why's this stink anyway?"

March 27—Two of the tutees made what I considered monumental improvements within their papers. They took the suggestions and ideas the group had made two weeks ago and put them to use. I was impressed! Besides being cordial and sincere, they all seemed to have a focus, an intent, and interest in their writing, and they revealed this in the conference.

April 24—I am finding that as time passes and the groups become freer with criticizing and making suggestions for each other's papers, there is less and less for the tutor to do. However, that is not always the case because the questions posed become more complex as the students gain knowledge. I also find that the group as a whole often dictates the amount of time devoted to any one paper. It seems as though they instinctively come to know which papers require the most revision and focus on them without any prompting from me. I can really see improvement in style and technique, and even the shyer members of the group are now making contributions. In the beginning, these less confident group members, when asked to comment, simply said things like, "It seems pretty good," or "I like it." Now, they too are a valuable part of the writing community, adding to the insight of the group. Other tutors made similar observations. Their experiences were overwhelmingly positive and enhanced their tutoring and teaching skills.

Collaborative learning thus became a reality in our classroom. By investing tutors with the authority of group leaders, we were able to overcome some of the nagging problems of group work and, at the same time, transform our Writing Lab into a writing community.

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Clarion, PA

Works Cited

- Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. London: Oxford UP, 1973.
- McAndrew, David, and Thomas Reigstad. *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1984.

Writing without teachers, writing with tutors

While there is nothing new in grouping students to discuss their writing, finding a method, a process, for writing groups that genuinely works is not a common occurrence. Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* long ago demonstrated that students can and will make substantial, necessary revisions in their writing if left alone long enough to respond to each other truthfully and candidly. But what happens in peer writing groups is often less than satisfying. Especially with basic writers, the motivation and self assurance needed to propel a group toward meaningful interaction has not yet developed. By the time the teacher has modeled enough and the students have practiced enough to be able to help each other, the semester is over. There isn't enough of the teacher to go around, and thus discussion groups often flounder or meander off into discussions of Sunday's football game or Friday night's party. Basic writing students require some sort of guidance in peer groups, but without the inhibiting atmosphere teachers sometimes inadvertently create simply by their presence. We have found that tutors can effectively provide the needed guidance to facilitate the smooth operation of the group, insuring its ultimate growth and development as a functioning writing community.

In our basic writing class of twenty, each tutor is assigned to a group of five students. The early semester formation of peer writing groups is tentative with a view toward gender, age, and racial balance. Later in the semester we make other adjustments as the group dynamics emerge. For example, personality conflicts sometimes necessitate intergroup movement. Or, if a group is composed entirely of introverts, some shifting may be necessary to balance personality types within the group. Tutors are also assigned to groups based on gender, age, race, and personality considerations.

Once groups are formed, the tutor for each group initiates and directs interaction based on five or six questions developed by the instructor to reinforce classroom instruction. The person to the left of the tutor distributes

copies of his/her paper to each group member. Next, the author reads the paper aloud as the others silently consider the essay in light of the guide questions. After the reading, each group member, beginning with the person to the left of the author, responds to the essay by answering the first question which is always: "What is the best feature of this essay?" It is crucial to begin the critique with a positive, rapport-building comment (McAndrew and Reigstad), and the tutor ensures that this takes place. Subsequent questions are answered in the same fashion with the tutor making sure that each student answers each question discretely. Concurrently, the author makes notes on the critiques so that s/he will have a record of group response to aid revision. With the conclusion of the first paper's critique, the next member reads his/her paper, and the same process is repeated until all group members have shared their essays.

The tutor's task during group work is a delicate one. It involves eliciting meaningful peer response from students who are often reluctant to express their opinions for one reason or another. The tendency on the part of tutors, impatient or uncomfortable with delayed or unfocused responses, is to dominate the discussion by simply *telling* the group their own reaction to the paper. Instead of facilitating individual responses, the tutor may inhibit group exchange. Thus, tutors need to be made aware of this and other pitfalls which can stagnate group interaction.

In our classes we have developed a repertoire of techniques to nurture a sense of community in the group and facilitate sincere and substantive peer critiques. Launching the group as a unit is the first step. Learning names personalizes instruction and makes group members more comfortable with one another. It is also helpful to begin group work with a values clarification exercise or some other activity that will insure everyone's participation.

Once the peer critiques begin, certain problems frequently emerge. One of the

most common problems is exhibited by the reluctant student, who often offers generic comments like, "I think it's good" in response to questions designed to elicit specific feedback. Very often this can be addressed early in the session by the tutor. By making the initial response to the paper, the tutor models a meaningful comment for the group. In giving the first reaction, the tutor opens the discourse in a non-threatening manner and also demonstrates his/her position as a participating member of the group, rather than a group authority.

A very different sort of problem is posed by the student who is intent on taking control of the group. One such student, Bob, a more fluent and creative writer than the rest, felt held back by the group and continually tried to impose his own agenda. When it was his turn to respond to a question, he would dominate the discussion with lengthy, unfocused commentary. When his own paper was being critiqued, instead of listening and taking notes, he again dominated the discussion by defending his paper and justifying his choices. From our experience with Bob, two strategies emerged for dealing with this type of students. One of our tutors handled the situation by specifically redirecting the discussion, designating another group member to respond. By continually repeating this strategy, the tutor was able to regain control of the group and restore the balance of interaction. Another tutor adopted a more direct approach. He spoke to Bob after class and explained the importance of maintaining group dynamics; he suggested that Bob see him for individual consultations outside of the group situation. Thus by redirecting discussion or offering an alternative form of feedback, our tutors were able to maintain group harmony.

Overall objection by instructors to the peer group methodology have centered on two areas: the students' lack of experience and thus inability to provide meaningful feedback to each other, and the inordinate amount of classroom time absorbed by the continued use of peer writing groups. But

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TUTORS' COLUMN

It's us against them. . .sort of

It's Sunday evening, 7:04: late for work at the writing center as usual. I climb the stairs to the fourth floor of the library and step briskly in the direction of the center. . .O.K., I admit, not *that* briskly. I'm tired, I'm grumpy, and I am hoping that there is no one waiting for me. But I remember that Brendan is also on duty tonight.

"Maybe he's already there," I mumble. "He can have the first one."

I turn the corner to the center: no Brendan. However, much to my dismay, someone else is there; an annoyed face stares back at me, attached to a fidgeting body and a hand clutching a paper that looks to be at least nine or ten pages in length.

My attitude is horrible; his is even worse. I sit down, he gets up, and places the paper on the table.

"What can I do for you?" I ask in a pathetically mock-pleasant voice. I know exactly what he wants me to do. In my head I predict and say to myself what I think his response to the question will be. And my prediction is exactly right.

"I just need a quick proofread," he blurts. I smile sardonically and ask him to have a seat. I'm in no mood to tutor, but I take a sort of twisted pleasure in the fact that I'll be detaining him much longer than he had anticipated staying. "It's us against them," I mutter to myself, and I know that on this particular evening, we will win.

But this salvaging of some sort of satisfaction does little to ease the sense of overwhelming bitterness in my gut. This job would be easier and a lot more enjoyable if people came wanting to talk about something other than grammar. Hey, if someone visited the center wanting to *talk* about grammar, I'd be happy. It seems all they want is for me to read their paper over and tell them what's wrong with it. Sometimes they tell me straight out, but other times they

imply it. I just *know* that all they want is a "grammar check." The result? A chip the size of *Warriner's* on my shoulder. "No one has a clue as to what the writing center's supposed to be all about," I often hiss. "No one knows, except the tutors."

But what could be done about it? I started asking myself that very question. Actually, a writing teacher and my boss at the center, Jim Meyer, asked the question for me. He wondered if I'd be interested in doing some sort of survey composed of questions that tried to get at the fundamental question of how people (faculty, students and tutors) perceive the center, and I thought it was a great idea. But secretly (or not so secretly, rather) I felt I knew what the outcome of the survey would be: instead of merely knowing in our minds it was "us against them," we'd have documented proof of it. We printed up the surveys, handed them out, and waited for them to come back to us.

We got them all back—well, not exactly all of them—and began compiling the information. First, tutors responded just as I had expected they would. Most felt just like I did. They were frustrated at students seemingly trying to take advantage of them, bringing obviously unread papers in to be "cleaned up" and "checked for grammar and punctuation." One tutor stated that she refused to correct grammar for "lazy Americans" (I smiled), though another thought that actually correcting grammar was appropriate ("damn him," I muttered). All in all, the responses of the tutors' questionnaires, as well as the many conversations I had with them, coincided with my own beliefs: no one except the tutors knew what the center's true function was.

Next came the faculty questionnaires, and I began to go over them skeptically. However, as I studied them, I found my eyes bug-ging in disbelief. I read over a segment of the surveys which asked the professors to rank in order of importance the aspects of writing for which they referred students to

the center. I was sure that grammar and punctuation would head the list.

But they didn't. In fact, they were ranked towards the bottom, well behind (could it be possible?) aspects such as "organization" and "clarity." I couldn't believe it. The faculty did have a clue after all, but the students. . .I knew their surveys would tell a different story.

And guess what? I was wrong again. When asked why they visited the center, they most often listed grammar and punctuation well behind clarity and organization. I thought of the many students who came to the center and specifically asked for me to proofread their papers, and tried to come up with some sort of explanation for their response on the survey.

How could it be? I suppose the most logical reason would be to say that the students simply lied. I wanted to think this, but the survey was handed in anonymously, and so I felt that I should give them the benefit of the doubt. But perhaps what served as a better explanation were the responses of students to another question. When asked if they had ever been sent to the center by a professor and then asked to state the reason for their being sent, a number of students wrote that grammar was the biggest and most frequent reason. I began to wonder if perhaps students felt pressured to "get the grammar right" when visiting the center, foregoing their own wishes to talk about other aspects such as content and clarity. But, once again, I *knew* that this was certainly not the case. I refused to believe the surveys.

However, their response was certainly interesting, considering that their own professors had not listed grammar as a top reason for making a referral. Once again, I was faced with the prospect that people had lied on their questionnaires—this time the professors being at fault. It was a scary thought. Once again, I felt as though I should give them the benefit of the doubt. But if it was

true that neither group was lying, that both were telling the truth, how could I reconcile their seemingly contradictory answers?

It was simple, perhaps even a bit of a cliché, but a breakdown in communication seemed to be the answer (or, rather, problem). Professors did want their students to talk about their papers as a whole with a writing tutor, but somehow students were getting a different impression. Maybe it was points being marked off for grammar mistakes in papers, or maybe students just assumed that professors thought the writing center was a place to “polish” final drafts, a place to have papers “proofread.” I wasn’t sure, but somewhere, somehow students were picking up vibes that told them to bring their papers to the center to be proofread, and that’s exactly what they were doing.

That’s what the tutors had said, anyway. But could it be that. . .no, of course not. The tutors wouldn’t lie on their surveys. Would they? Once again, I thought of the many times (like the one mentioned beforehand) when a student brought me a paper and asked to have its grammar checked. I told myself it was a fact that a lot of students brought their papers in simply to have them proofread. But for every student that ordered me to read the paper over for punctuation and grammar mistakes, there was another that didn’t. In fact, many students didn’t say anything. When I would ask them what I could do for them, they would shrug and tell me that they had a paper for me to read. My next question would most always be “when is it due?” And their response? Nine times out of ten, the student would answer “tomorrow.” Sighing (to myself), I would begin to read the paper, pointing out “major grammatical mistakes” to the student.

Most of the tutors responding to the survey voiced frustration at this fact, that nine out of ten papers brought to the center are due the very next day. It was frustrating for them (myself included) to work hard at learning to be “intelligent readers” of first and second drafts in writing center training sessions, and then be limited in what they could and couldn’t comment on. When a paper is due in a matter of hours, instead of days, there is a limit as to what the tutor can comment on. If it is ten o’clock at night and the paper is due at eight o’clock the following morning, I will never tell a student that a paper is “a mess.” I simply try to help them patch it up as best they can and hope that they learn something about writing in the process.

If a student comes in a few days before the paper is due. . .that’s a different story. They’ve got some room to breathe, some time to play with, and so I’ll show them organizational rough spots and sections that may have to be re-worked. It’s not going to shatter their confidence and make them sick, as similar comments made the night before a paper is due might. But if they are confused, or do feel overwhelmed, there will be a tutor to help them along in the process following.

But how does this relate to the survey? Since Jim and I did our study, I’ve come to the conclusion that tutors—especially myself—need to have a better attitude. Whenever I help a student with a paper that they tell me is due the very next day, I most always harbor resentment toward them. Why? Because I feel restricted and obligated to “check grammar,” something that most everyone who is associated with a writing center in one way or another will agree is only one aspect of a tutor’s job. Yet often it seems to make up the bulk of what I do in the center, and so my attitude gets bad. But maybe tutors are as much at fault as students and the teachers who send them. Maybe tutors and “writing center people” need to give faculty and tutees the benefit of the doubt, keeping their minds open to the possibility that faculty and students do not see the writing center merely as a place to get papers “fixed up.” Maybe tutors need to be nicer, explaining to students who visit that there is only so much one lone “night before” session can do for a paper and, more importantly, for a person who writes. I know I need to do so.

Since the completion of the survey, I’ve tried to put these thoughts into practice. Jim and I even made a presentation of the study to the faculty, to try and open up a better channel of communication. Members of the faculty wanted to make sure that we did not ignore grammar (we assured them that this was so), but they also, for the most part, upheld our own belief that the center is for talking about writing and improving the writer. They told us that they would love for their students to bring in rough drafts and work *with* the tutors. They did not want tutors doing work for the students, and once again, we assured them that tutors did not. All in all, I think it did a lot to dispel some myths about tutoring itself, and helped everyone to see where everyone else was coming from. Since then, some professors who came to our presentation have even required their classes to come to the writing center with a rough

draft for comments. (Eighteen impatient students lined up in the writing center the night before a first draft is due is another issue to deal with altogether.)

And finally, whenever I feel my tutoring blood begin to boil, I ask myself when was the last time I brought a rough draft to the center. This thought always brings me crashing back down to academic reality. I am a rushed, over-committed student just like the students I help. Their situation is just like mine, and so we’ve all got to do the best that we can with the situations we are given. Ideally, every student would bring in two or three drafts for comments, but this rarely (if ever) happens. Why? It’s called “the real world,” and I think tutors need to be ever conscious of it, while not losing a beautiful vision of papers being brought to the center a week before the due date and pushing for such situations.

It’s Sunday afternoon as I write this article for my Advanced Composition course. I work in the center tonight. . .I think I’ll have Brendan look at my paper and see what he has to say. And I’m sure that my attitude will be that much better when I help someone this evening, for tonight I am one of “them.” This article is, you guessed it, due tomorrow.

*Matt Bolinder
Peer Tutor
Gordon College
Wenham, MA*

**Rocky Mountain
Writing Centers
Association**

October 27-29, 1994
Colorado Springs, Colorado

For registration and conference information, contact Anne E. Mullin, ISU Writing Lab, Campus Box 8010, Idaho State University, Pocatello, ID 83209 (208-236-3662). The RMWCA conference will meet conjointly with the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association.

**Wyoming
Conference
on English**

Call for Papers
June 21-25, 1994
Laramie, Wyoming
"Multicultural Literacies"

Deadline for call for papers: April 8, 1994. For further information, contact Kathy Evertz or Cathy Kunce, Wyoming Conference on English, Dept. of English, P.O. Box 3353, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY 82071-3353 (Phone: 307-766-6486; e-mail: kevertz@uwyo.edu)

**National Writing
Centers Association**

April 13-16, 1994
New Orleans, LA
Keynote speaker: Richard Riley, Secretary of Education

For registration and information: West of the Mississippi, Ray Wallace, Dept. of Language and Communications, Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, LA 71457 (318-357-6272; fax: 318-357-5942; e-mail: Wallace@Alpha.nsula.edu). East of the Mississippi, Byron Stay, Dept. of Rhetoric and Writing, Mount St. Mary's College, Emmitsburg, MD 21727 (301-447-5367; fax: 301-447-5755; e-mail: Stay@msmary.edu).

***New Writing Center Journal* editor(s) sought**

After their years of dedicated hard work and superb editing (which all of us in the writing center community recognize and benefit from), Nancy Grimm, Diana George, and Edward Lotto, the editors of the *Writing Center Journal*, are stepping down. The Spring 1994 issue will be the last they edit.

In keeping with tradition, they invite applications for the position of editor(s) starting

with the Fall 1994 issue. The new editor(s) should have a strong background in work with writing centers and have a broad knowledge of the practical and theoretical issues important for centers. In addition, the candidate(s) should bring some institutional support in the form of released time or financial resources to use for editorial assistants, printing, and mailing. Candidates for the position should talk with the administration at

their schools to get a commitment for these resources.

To apply, send a detailed letter with your plans for the direction of the journal and an indication of the support your institution can provide. Also include a vita. Send materials to Nancy Grimm, Dept. of Humanities, 1400 Townsend Drive, Houghton, MI 49931.

ASK CARL

"Ask Carl" is a highly irregular column of misadvice, weak puns, and general high jinks for writing center directors, tutors, and short-wave radio enthusiasts. Please send your questions, comments, and S&H Green Stamps to "Ask Carl," % Carl Glover, Dept. of Rhetoric & Writing, Mount St. Mary's College, Emmitsburg, MD, 21727, or via e-mail at: glover@msmary.edu

Last fall, "Ask Carl," a popular feature of "Rhetoric Radio," made its debut on WCcenter, the electronic writing center forum on the Internet. The column was received with such enthusiasm and derision that Muriel Harris asked me to share a few highlights and lowlights with *Writing Lab Newsletter* readers.

Many of the questions directed to "Ask Carl" are representative of the burning writing-center issues of the day:

- where on campus to locate a writing center
- how to select and hire tutors
- where to buy mail-order masters and postage-paid Ph Ds
- writing center evangelism and tent revivals
- proper writing-center attire, including protective headgear
- and the ever-popular "Ask Carl" Figures-of-Speech Quiz

To give you the flavor (pistachio nut) of the questions and comments that reached the "Ask Carl" in-box, I've excerpted our discussion of that age-old problem: what to call our student writing-center workers.

The debate raged over whether to call them "tutors" (too remedial, too school-marmish, too horn-like ["toot toot"]) or "consultants" (sleek and professional, yet formal, distant, often suggesting "unemployed").

My reply: "At our college we prefer the term 'pooh bah.'" Margaret-Rose Marek

wondered if the term was derived from writing-center praxis, asking, "When you look at someone's writing in your center, do you all say this is "pooh" and your ideas are "bah"?"

Sarah Kimball reported that at her writing center, "We reserve the term 'pooh bah' for the director when 'your excellency' gets tiresome." Karl Fornes thought "pooh bah" seemed "pretty good," but he also liked "grand wizard" and "guru" quite a lot. Dave Healy wrote that they recently banned the "t-word" and appropriated the "c-word," "though I much prefer pooh bah and am seriously contemplating another switch."

During the discussion I sensed a bit of confusion over distinguishing the director from the student workers, so I clarified the situation by explaining that the director is the "Grand Pooh Bah" while the students are the "Peer Pooh Bahs." Jeanne Simpson suggested a shortened "peer bahs." Not to be outdone, Steve Newmann called for Jeanne to reverse the names to yield "Bah Peers," thus enabling us to call the smallish ones "teeny bah peers." In a somber note, after consulting the "Ask Carl" archives, I confirmed that the Big Bah Peer had been killed in a plane crash with Buddy Holly and Richie Valens.

In an attempt to incorporate current events into our work, "Ask Carl" offered alternative names to those tutors who like to cut and slash away at student drafts: "peer BobBits" or "peer bobs," to cut it short. And for those who didn't like pooh bah and its variants, I suggested calling the youngest and strangest paper-slashers "teenage mutant ninja tutors."

What do you call your tutors? Do you have any other writing center questions for which you need bad advice? Write me: Carl W. Glover (glover@msmary.edu)

*Carl Glover
Mount Saint Mary's College
Emmitsburg, MD*

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations (WCAs)

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).

October 27-29: Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association, in Colorado Springs, CO
Contact: Anne E. Mullin, ISU Writing Lab, Campus Box 8010, Idaho State University, Pocatello, ID 83209 (208-236-3662)

Nonverbal communication and writing lab tutorials

Composition theory and literary theory often adopt multi-disciplinary approaches which strengthen their philosophical bases and broaden their vision. Writing labs should also utilize the knowledge gained from a variety of fields to further enhance their programs. For example, we are all aware intuitively of the psychological trauma some students experience when trying to write and of the emotional upset others experience when "having" to visit a writing lab. The fields of psychology, speech communication, and anthropology, among others, have some very interesting applications for writing labs, not the least of which is the study of nonverbal communication. Regardless of the sincerity and importance of a tutor's suggestions, mixed messages can be and often are sent to the student via nonverbal communication, thus undermining the tutorial session. We send *a lot* of information, often *conflicting* information, through body language. It becomes necessary, then, to consider the *rhetoric* of our arms and legs!

Freida Hammermeister and Marjorie Timms state that "the impact of our nonverbal patterns of behavior is often underestimated or ignored" (133). But, rhetoricians of the Enlightenment carefully studied the placement of their hands and feet to achieve certain effects in their audience. They devoted handbooks to it, and while that is not necessary—or even useful—for modern communication, we nevertheless need to consider our nonverbal messages in writing lab tutorials, as well as in student conferences and in the writing classroom.

Hammermeister and Timms examine knowledge about nonverbal communication in light of teaching hearing-impaired students, but since, as they say, "a single channel by itself transmits insufficient information between interactors" (140), then monitoring the verbal channel alone is inadequate even for those students who aren't hearing-impaired. Speech alone isn't enough for the students who enter writing centers for help. So what, other than speech, can we be made aware of as tutors? The channels of

nonverbal communication have been identified as body movements, posture, proximity and use of space, bodily contact, hand gestures, head-nods, facial expressions, eye contact and gaze, appearance, and paralanguage (Hammermeister and Timms 134). Let's examine some of these in the writing lab context.

In a study of children, Elizabeth McAllister reports that teacher expectations for individuals affected teacher body language and subsequently affected student self-expectations and achievement. How we reveal our expectations is called "leakage," and leakage occurs most often through the body—the face is easiest to control (Hammermeister and Timms 136). Not only can knowledge of this help us control our emotions and attitudes, but it can also help us examine the sometimes contradictory messages our students send. What their face and words are saying may not be what they're truly feeling about their writing. Hammermeister and Timms cite such activities as "hands tearing at fingernails, the holding of knees or digging at the cheek," and the "repetition of foot or leg movements" as possible signs of leakage (136).

Steven Grubaugh also suggests that we can detect student messages by reading their body language, thus judging their mood and rate of understanding. In an almost tautological circle, our reading of *students' behavior* again affects us: Brooks and Woolfolk say that student attentiveness affects teacher impressions and subsequent behaviors.

Another channel of nonverbal communication we must examine as we interact with students is proximity and use of space. In a classroom situation, Hammermeister and Timms suggest that most participation comes from students seated directly opposite the instructor. However, only in restaurants do *friends* sit opposite one another. Furthermore, the authors say that a head-on orientation is often chosen for confrontation (136). This has obvious ramifications for writing lab tutorials and teacher-student conferences and

is a point which has often been considered. Generally, the evidence cited by the authors mentioned here suggests that a side-by-side arrangement is psychologically conducive to a less-aggressive tutorial session. The distance people sit or stand from each other is another important aspect of nonverbal communication and varies across cultures. Sanders and Wiseman report that different collegiate culture groups emphasize different kinds of communication. Ilona Leki cites anecdotal evidence that body language indeed differs among nationalities. She says Latin American and Arabian students may sit or stand extremely close compared to North American students (77). Knowledge of this is crucial in avoiding misunderstanding or discomfort as we tutor.

Leki's evidence extends into other channels of nonverbal communication such as body contact. She suggests that Vietnamese students may not be comfortable with being physically touched (77). Marianne LaFrance further suggests that girls and women are touched more often than boys and men in educational environments; she also suggests that is a sign of status in many cases rather than a sign of affection. Nevertheless, Hammermeister and Timms say touch can be a positive reinforcer (136). Should we reach out to a student obviously struggling with difficulties? Perhaps the answer to the question truly does depend on the individual situation. As for gender differences, Hechman and Rosenthal report that undergraduate instructors behave more positively in instructing students for whose gender the material being taught is stereotypically appropriate, and vice-versa. Are we guilty of this in tutorials—specifically in relation to the subject matter of the writing? Not only must we monitor our behavior, but we must also consider our attitudes in order to be the most effective tutors and teachers possible.

Other areas of nonverbal communication involve head-nods and eye contact. How often these channels are used varies racially according to Robert S. Feldman, and it varies culturally according to Leki. Feldman says

that white and black North Americans show different patterns of head-nodding and eye gazing and that teacher nonverbal behavior is related to teacher attitudes. Leki says that El Salvadoran students complain that Americans don't look them in the eye (therefore suggesting that they may perceive Americans as lying, evasive or insincere). Japanese students, on the other hand, prefer not to look directly into another's eyes, according to Leki. On campuses with a wide cross-cultural composition, what's a tutor to do?

Again, the individual situation will determine the response. Hammermeister and Timms do say that a direct gaze can be positively reinforcing in our culture; along with head-nods and facial signals, a gaze can suggest involvement, approval, and encouragement (138). Interestingly, news reporters taught by old-school methods will gaze intently but forego head-nodding during on-camera interviews, because the head-nod so evidently suggests approval of the interviewee.

Another nonverbal channel is appearance; how should we dress? That question depends on whether we view ourselves as *tutors* or *peers*. Generally, writing labs do themselves a professional and political favor by adopting a minimal dress code for their tutors, but strictly formal attire usually does not put students at ease, either. A moderate professionalism, then, is in order.

So, how can we detect and improve all these channels of nonverbal behavior? Hammermeister and Timms suggest using videotape (140). Some schools routinely videotape first-year composition instructors as they lecture, but why not use videotape to record tutorials? The results can be effective not only in examining nonverbal behavior, but also in evaluating the actual content of the tutorial. They could become effective tutor training tools. Other suggestions include rearranging rooms for maximum student comfort, increasing positive nonverbal feedback to encourage students, and sharpening the ability to read students' nonverbal behavior (Hammermeister and Timms 140).

Again, why is all this necessary when successful tutorials have been conducted for years now? Because our nonverbal behavior *really does show*. Babad, Bernieri, and Rosenthal report on their examination of videotaped teacher responses to both high and low expectancy students. Facial and other

nonverbal channels communicated teacher expectancies of those students. When we're least aware of it, it shows!

Examining psychological factors such as nonverbal communication can help not only writing lab tutors and directors, but also composition instructors in increasing the quality of their one-on-one student conferences and of their in-class performance. It can likewise aid in discovering possible reasons why some peer-edit sessions and class discussions prove to be virtual failures. Nonverbal channel awareness also has practical applications for everyday professional and personal interactions.

Being a good tutor or an effective teacher is difficult; doing either requires one to attend to a number of problems at once. Awareness of every possible signal the body may be emitting would be frustrating, if not impossible, and if carried to its extreme might hamper communication altogether, just as an overriding concern with surface error can stifle students' writing abilities. However, let's keep in mind that we are all *people watchers*, and as Hammermeister and Timms point out, nonverbal language can be "loud and powerful" in its silence (133, 140). Actions really can be louder than words!

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Peer tutoring: A holistic approach

Peer tutors can be wonderful adjuncts, especially if they are working in conjunction with the instructors. To increase the effectiveness of the peer tutoring experience for students, it is necessary to take a holistic approach to tutoring. A holistic approach simply means considering not only the actual tutoring session, but also all aspects of the tutor-student relationship. The tutor must be willing to look past the actual writing mistakes to try to find the source of the problem. In order to accomplish this, the tutor must be willing to actually look at the student, not just at his/her work.

When speaking of peer tutoring, what we must take into consideration is that with peer tutoring there are basically three types of students who will utilize our services. There are those students who realize their weaknesses and seek out our help. There are students who received suggestions to come see us, and who are willing to allow us to help them. Lastly, there are students who for various reasons are required to come see us and who do not see the point to this "waste of time" when they don't have any writing problems.

It is also important to make attempts to realize the sources of the student's writing problems. It may be that the student has no interest in the topic he/she must write on or that he/she dislikes writing in itself. The student may have an actual fear of writing or may not understand the intrinsics of the grammar and proofreading necessary to write a good paper. Many students cannot organize their thoughts or do not know where to actually start their writing. Any of these problems can manifest themselves in poorly written papers. Finding and dealing with one of the above sources of problems may lead to an improvement in writing skills and may also increase the student's willingness to write.

The first category to consider is that of students who come to us freely. Their reasons vary: they want good grades, they realize

they need help, or they may not know how to proofread and may want us to do it for them. To help these students, it is necessary to understand the assignment. Then it's necessary to build confidence and point out improvements. Tutors need to work to find the source of the problem. They should not proofread the student's paper—it's an easy trap to fall into. Instead, the tutor should teach the student how to proofread. Lack of this skill is a common problem for most students we see. The students who come voluntarily are often easiest to work with, but tutors should not allow themselves to do the student's work.

Students who are unwilling to admit they need help with their writing are, for me, the most difficult to work with. Oftentimes these students have a very derogatory attitude towards the writing center and the tutors. They may also express anger toward the teacher who sent them to the center. Some of the students may not feel English classes are necessary parts of the curriculum. This situation may be especially common among students whose writing was praised in high school, but whose college teachers now have higher and different expectations of the students. It is important when dealing with these students to keep in contact with the student's teacher. As the tutor works with students, he/she must try to keep an open mind. Rather than making sweeping statements, such as "this is wrong," the tutor should discuss the paper's weakness using specific examples from the paper to illustrate any weaknesses. Lastly, as these students may be resentful because they are working with someone their own age, tutors should make every effort not to appear condescending or patronizing.

In determining the source of the student's problem with writing, tutors can look for trends in the student's writing. They should look for overall flaws in the thought process or idea formation. It is useful to begin with the basic needs, such as organization skills, and work toward the more complex needs

and build confidence. One of the basic flaws in our current grading system is that there is not a lot of room to account for improvement. Also, since minor improvements may be very important to the students, tutors must work to foster a healthy sense of pride in these improvements.

If the student has no interest in the topic, there are a few options tutors can utilize to attempt to aid the student. They can look for parallels between the subject, the topic, and something that may interest the student and try to find out why the student has no interest in the subject. If the lack of interest is why he/she does not understand the topic, the tutor should work at explaining it until the student has an adequate understanding. Sometimes it is best to ask the student simply to sit down and begin writing. He/she can go back and edit for initial mistakes later. Sometimes the scariest feeling for the student is generated when he/she looks at a blank page. In cases when the student dislikes writing itself, try to determine the reason why. Having the student talk through his/her ideas on the topic and explain them in his/her own words can be helpful here. Bringing in an old assignment and/or any background literature is also useful in generating ideas that can be written about.

A student with a fear of writing requires a solid starting place in order to write a paper. Talking through the subject with the student and getting his/her ideas down on paper will provide the student with this solid foundation. Explaining what a thesis is and how to develop ideas will guide the fearful writing student. When ready to ask for a draft, tutors should begin with topics the student is genuinely interested in.

If the student cannot organize his/her thoughts or lacks organizational skills, then a progressive set of steps is useful in teaching the student how to organize his/her thoughts. The tutor can begin with the thesis, and then generate ideas concerning the thesis. Once the ideas are collected, they must be out-

lined. It may be necessary to instruct the student how to outline, while stressing the importance of how an outline is needed to keep the paper cohesive. Once these general steps are learned, the tutor begins with a basic/simple assignment. Examples of some assignments include an outline of a topic or a five-paragraph paper on something that interests students.

In situations where the student does not understand the intrinsics of grammar, as seen frequently with English as a Second Language (ESL) students, an explanation of the grammar rules may be necessary. Tutors should look for trends in grammar mistakes in the student's paper. It may be necessary for the tutor to review the rules of grammar with the student, but the tutor should not just correct the mistakes, because they will keep recurring.

Oftentimes, the student has written the paper and now must proofread his/her work. The tutor can assist the student with proofreading the first time, but must resist the urge to proofread for the student. Once again, the tutor must be willing to explain the mistakes to the student. The tutor can also provide tips to the student on proofreading skills, such as

reading the paper from end to beginning when looking for mistakes in grammar and spelling.

Many times the student simply does not know where to begin when faced with a new assignment. The tutor can suggest means of generating ideas, such as grouping ideas. If the paper is an argumentative paper, asking the student to think of the other side's arguments will often be enough to get the student started. Lastly, the tutor can ask the student to just begin writing (if he/she can't think of an opening, begin at the middle or at the end) because the paper can then be rewritten after the student has begun.

In summary, tutoring any student is not difficult if tutors begin at the beginning by looking for the source of the problems, working them out, and encouraging the student to take an active role in the tutoring session. Optimizing the student's role helps both the student and the tutor to benefit from the interaction.

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Call for Papers for *Computers & Composition*

Christine Hult and Joyce Kinkead will serve as guest editors for a special issue of *Computers & Composition* focusing on writing centers that will appear in 1995. Welcome are articles that discuss the convergences of computers and writing centers. July 1, 1994 is the working deadline for sending manuscripts. The editors appreciate letters of intent as soon as possible to aid in their planning. Submissions from public school teachers are also desirable.

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