

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 18, Number 9

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

May, 1994

...FROM THE EDITOR...

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• Muriel Harris, editor

...INSIDE...

<i>Countering the Myth of (In)dependence: Developing Life-Long Clients</i>	1
• Dave Healy	
<i>Discovering Order in Chaos: Fostering Meaning Without Crushing Creativity</i>	4
• Steve Sherwood	
<i>Ask Carl</i>	7
• Carl Glover	
<i>Tutorfood: English Toffee Bars</i>	7
• Marnie Petray	
<i>Conference Announcements</i>	8
<i>Closing the Gap</i>	8
• Jelene Hanson	
<i>Electronic Discourse for Writing Consultants</i>	10
• Valerio Balestor	
<i>Tutor's Column: "Teaching Assistants Learn Teaching Tips by Tutoring"</i>	13
• Lisa Johnson-Shull	
<i>"Don't Make Me Think!"</i>	14
• Marlon Linehan	
<i>Conference Calendar</i>	14
<i>Training Tutors to Read Technical Writing</i>	15
• Bonnie Hahn	
<i>Job Listings</i>	16

Countering the myth of (in)dependence: Developing life-long clients

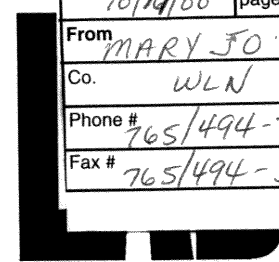
Writing center folks tend to be a rather self-analytical lot. Aware that we have been routinely misdefined and misunderstood (North), we carefully deconstruct the images others have created for us. One effective way of dis-covering these images is by analyzing the metaphors that have, explicitly or implicitly, characterized writing centers. Two recent analyses in this vein focus on the way disease metaphors have helped define "the writing center." Peter Carino notes that the "clinic" metaphor which prevailed during the 1970s, "while garnering prestige for those who work there, degrades students by enclosing them in a metaphor of illness" (33). And among the triumvirate of metaphors for which Michael Pemberton finds evidence, two—the hospital and the madhouse—suggest that the writing center's clients are either sick or insane.

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To MARY WISLOCKI
 Co./Dept. NYU WRTG CTR
 Phone # 212/998-8863
 Fax # 212/995-4376

Date 10/17/00 # of pages 3
 From MARY JO TORLEY
 Co. WLN
 Phone # 765/494-7268
 Fax # 765/494-3780

WRITING



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Countering the Myth of (In)dependence: Developing Life-Long Clients

• Dave Healy 1

Discovering Order in Chaos: Fostering Meaning Without Crushing Creativity

• Steve Sherwood 4

Ask Carl

• Carl Glover 7

Tutorfood: English Toffee Bars

• Marnie Petray 7

Conference Announcements

8

Closing the Gap

• Jelene Hanson 8

Electronic Discourse for Writing Consultants

• Valorie Balester 10

Tutor's Column: "Teaching Assistants Learn Teaching Tips by Tutoring"

• Lisa Johnson-Shull 13

"Don't Make Me Think!"

• Marlon Linahan 14

Conference Calendar

14

Training Tutors to Read Technical Writing

• Bonnie Hahn 15

Job Listings

16

Countering the myth of (in)dependence: Developing life-long clients

Writing center folks tend to be a rather self-analytical lot. Aware that we have been routinely misdefined and misunderstood (North), we carefully deconstruct the images others have created for us. One effective way of dis-covering these images is by analyzing the metaphors that have, explicitly or implicitly, characterized writing centers. Two recent analyses in this vein focus on the way disease metaphors have helped define "the writing center." Peter Carino notes that the "clinic" metaphor which prevailed during the 1970s, "while garnering prestige for those who work there, degrades students by enclosing them in a metaphor of illness" (33). And among the triumvirate of metaphors for which Michael Pemberton finds evidence, two—the hospital and the mad-house—suggest that the writing center's clients are either sick or insane.

According to Carino and Pemberton, illness metaphors perpetuate the idea that writing problems constitute a disease and that the clinic/hospital's job is to effect a cure, that "patients" come to us when they're sick and leave when they're well. Implicit in the illness metaphor is the notion that healthy people don't need us and the assumption that

more effective “wellness” programs in elementary and secondary schools would minimize the need for the services we offer. Both Carino and Pemberton see disease metaphors as pejorative constructions that caricaturize the writing center. I suspect most of us who work there would agree and would consider the clinic/hospital conception of writing centers to be old-fashioned. But even though we may feel we have moved beyond the illness metaphor, the notion persists in our profession that, like our counterparts in the medical world, our long-range goal with respect to any given client is to render ourselves unnecessary. If we are not “curing” the linguistically ill or de-

praved, still, if we are effective, we should be working ourselves out of a job—or so the theory goes.

Hope Hartman, writing not specifically about writing centers but rather tutorial programs in general, states the dictum explicitly. Having defined the purpose of tutoring as “to facilitate academic gain and develop self-directed or independent learners” (2), Hartman goes on to say that “on the basis of this theory, tutors are prepared to tutor themselves out of a job” (3). Moore and Poppino, in the introduction to their book *Successful Tutoring*, state a similar goal: “[This] text considers tutoring to be an effort by tutors to assist students to *learn to learn*, thus making them less, not more, dependent on tutors” (4). Writing center theorists have put the matter somewhat less baldly but no less emphatically. Mary Croft, for example, warns of the dangers of client dependence and argues: “Tutors have a responsibility to wean students away from the center” (178). Irene Clark, in an article on the ethics of collaboration, states: “There is no question that the goal of writing centers is to make students ultimately independent of the assistance of a tutor” (“Collaboration” 7). Elsewhere, Clark echoes this sentiment and predicates it on the assertion of learning theorist Jerome Bruner that “the tutor must direct his instruction in a fashion that eventually makes it possible for the student to take over the corrective function himself. Otherwise, the result of instruction is to create a form of mastery that is contingent upon the perpetual presence of the tutor” (quoted in “Maintaining Chaos” 85).

According to these theorists, then, the goal of a writing center is to help produce *independent* learners. Tutors must always be on their guard lest they unwittingly foster dependence. And presumably, the essence of independence for an ex-client is captured in the prefix *ex*. The assumption is that if the center has done its job well, writers will eventually no longer need its services.

I would like to challenge that assumption. While we may say we’re uncomfortable with illness metaphors as embodying the essence of writing centers, a stated goal of weaning writers away from the center implicitly accepts the fundamental premise of those metaphors: that a legitimate need for the center’s services is by definition short-term. By this logic, writers who keep coming back to the

writing center represent one of two things: either a failure of the center to do its job adequately, or else the center’s complicity in a state of (co)dependency. Let me pursue these two assumptions.

Viewing long-term clients as advertisements for the writing center’s failure betrays misconceptions both about the mission of the writing center and about the phenomenology of writing. To suggest that if we were doing our job, writers would not continue to need us is to perpetuate an image that Andrea Lunsford has called “The Center as Storehouse.” Storehouse Centers, says Lunsford, are based on an epistemology that views knowledge and reality as “exterior to or outside of us, as immediately accessible, individually knowable, measurable, and shareable” (4). The Storehouse Center’s mandate, then, is to share its knowledge, to dispense information, to improve its clients’ skills. Presumably, clients return to the Storehouse Center only when they need more information or skills. The assumption is that eventually they will acquire enough of both so that they no longer need the Storehouse; instead, they will have become repositories themselves. If, however, they continue returning to the Center, it must be because the Center has failed in its mission to impart knowledge.

As Lunsford observes, Storehouse Centers perform some useful services, but their epistemological underpinnings are suspect. Knowledge, most of us now believe, is socially constructed and mediated. Furthermore, Storehouse Centers perpetuate a teacher-centered locus of power: “[C]ontrol resides in the tutor or center staff, the possessors of information, the currency of the Academy” (7). As an alternative to the hierarchical, individualistic, positivistic view of knowledge implicit in Storehouse Centers, Lunsford proposes what she calls “Burkean Parlor Centers,” which are founded on collaborative principles and which view knowledge as “always contextually bound, as always socially constructed” (8). For a motto for such centers, Lunsford turns to Hannah Arendt: “For Excellence, the presence of others is always required.”

If excellence always requires the presence of others, then the notion that we have failed writers who keep coming back to the writing center seems strange indeed. On the contrary, return visits may well indicate that cli-

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Editor: Muriel Harris; Asst. to the Editor: Mary Jo Turley, English Dept., Purdue University, 1356 Heavilon, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356 (317)494-7268. e-mail:harrism@mace.cc.purdue.edu

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ents have grasped a fundamental truth about writing: that it is not simply information which can be dispensed, appropriated, and exploited, but rather that writing is an ongoing exercise in collaboration, recursiveness, and mutuality. Far from failing repeat customers, the Burkean Parlor Center has given them that most valuable of lessons—that a writer's work is never done, and that two (or more) minds are better than one.

I have been challenging the assumption that clients who keep coming to the writing center represent a failure of the center's information-dispensing or skill-transferring responsibilities. Another specter raised by the long-term client is dependency. The threat of dependency provides the context for Mary Croft's admonition, quoted above, about weaning students away from the center. Croft is concerned with the reluctant student but warns that "[c]enter teachers must avoid allowing the initial reluctance of students to become dependence" (178). Michael Pemberton devotes an entire essay to the problem of dependency. He assumes that dependence is the opposite of independence and that promoting independence is the writing center's ultimate goal. "Most writing center tutors and administrators would agree that dependency is directly at odds with their pedagogical mission. True, they offer help and assistance to blocked or struggling or novice writers, but their primary goal is to foster 'in-dependency,' to empower writers with the tools they need to work through texts themselves, not to rely on others inordinately for help with their writing" ("Dependency" 3).

Pemberton's phrase, "to empower writers with the tools they need to work through texts themselves," is a loaded one. By appropriating the language of empowerment, he aligns himself with currently fashionable pedagogy. But his invocation of solitary writers working through texts by themselves is a throwback to a view of language production that most contemporary compositionists lament as an unwanted legacy of literary studies: the notion that successful writers closet themselves, work in solitude, and emerge with words chiseled on tablets of stone for an audience that knows who alone created those words.

Is it our job to foster independence? Few teachers of composition would argue with the claim that academic success depends

upon a certain resourcefulness or the ability to work independently. But getting feedback on one's writing does not constitute a state of deprivation that the developing writer will eventually outgrow. As a successful and experienced writer, I am continually dependent on my readers. To be able to talk with a reader, to receive impressions and suggestions, to get a better sense of how my words have been understood or misunderstood—these are luxuries that not all writers will always be able to enjoy. But to suggest that a place where talk about writing occurs is not a place for the linguistically independent reflects an impoverished understanding about the nature of writing and writers.

To be sure, dependency can be debilitating. Some writers come to the center paralyzed with insecurities and too willing to give up the responsibility for their own writing to someone else. Some writers come ignorant of the expectations and conventions they suddenly find themselves subject to, anxious to find someone who knows more than they do, and passive in the face of all they need to learn. Writers who find in the writing center a haven may need to be challenged to become more self-directed and proactive. The challenge for the writing center is not, however, to work itself out of a job, but rather to redefine the jobs that need to be done; not to wean writers from the center, but instead to provide nourishment for writers at various stages of development; not to cure people of their writing illnesses, but to infect them with the bug to collaborate.

Michael Pemberton is right: the clinic/madhouse metaphors have to go; they are reductive and destructive. But if we're going to get rid of them, then let's really get rid of them. Let's not hang on to a remnant of the illness metaphor: the notion that we only legitimately serve those writers who haven't yet achieved linguistic independence, who still require our temporary "services" on the road to health and wholeness. Instead, let's adapt a phrase from the American Dairy Association and assert with pride that "You never outgrow your need for a writing center."

Dave Healy
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Discovering order in chaos: Fostering meaning without crushing creativity

For a long time now, I've believed that writing centers serve the disorganized student best, and with few of the ethical dilemmas associated with "proofing" papers. After all, by teaching organizational strategies—or even providing patterns to follow—we help students mold fragmented notions into cohesive essays. But I've come to realize we must go about this cautiously. For while some students clutch at any logical pattern—the five-paragraph essay, for instance—as a lifeline, grateful for its limitations, others find such prepackaged linear logic uncomfortable, even repressive. In imposing order, we assume we understand what a student is trying to do and know best how to do it. We may be right, of course, but I fear we're often too quick to throw the lifeline. Take the case of Shinichi, for instance, an undergraduate studio art major already selling his works at galleries. He found a composition teacher's required essay format intolerable because, as he said, "I don't think this way." Shinichi wrote with the same freeform style he brought to sculpting: "I chip away at a stone, looking for the shape that is already there," he said, echoing Michelangelo. "It's hard to explain."

When he followed his own technique, Shinichi produced cryptic essays, some so elegantly complex that I hesitated to tamper with them, but which his instructor inevitably downgraded as chaotic. When we tried to fit his ideas into the assigned format, he wrote stilted, simple pieces that his instructor also downgraded.

As tutors, what advice do we give students like Shinichi, whose concept of order differs from that of their professors? How often, I wonder, do we miss seeing within their apparently chaotic works the concealed underpinnings of valid structure? Before cynically telling them to get back in line, perhaps we should consider the implications of the paradoxical new science of chaos, which has

found that a natural, often hidden, order underlies such chaotic real-world systems as rush-hour traffic, leaky faucets, and student papers. Research suggests that, given time, these complex nonlinear systems will self-organize (Paulson 40). William Paulson and others claim that the disorder—or *noise*—within such systems actually promotes self-organization, and "can lead to new levels of meaning" (43). Indeed, they say, noise functions as a potent creative force, "the only possible source of new patterns" (49). If they're right, then by eradicating disorder and forcing students' ideas into preset patterns, we may be disrupting self-organization and squelching creativity. If we wish to avoid this, we can begin by suspending judgment of strategies that on the surface appear unsound, by acquainting ourselves with, and perhaps applying, postmodern literary concepts that have culminated in chaos theory, and by forming with students and faculty what Katherine Hayles (6) calls a *feedback loop*, furnishing to those who need it a share of the noise so vital to creativity.

Ironically, although products of a chaotic education system, most academic writers are trained to uphold the traditions of logical positivism, based on Newtonian physics. As Hayles points out, positivists see the universe as a place of order and reason, where events occur along linear paths. Their assumption of a predictable, clockwork universe, Hayles says, is "encoded within the linguistic structure of stem and prefix" (11). "In language theory," she adds, "logical positivism held center stage with its program to purge discourse of imprecise utterances" (267) until after World War II, when postmodern writers, scientists, and philosophers dealt it "a death blow" (267). I would argue that logical positivism lives on in composition classes, where teachers relentlessly demand prose built along clear lines of cause and effect. Reflecting this essentially nineteenth century point of view, James Kinneavy re-

cently called for a rhetorical paradigm "compatible with the general tradition of theory in the history of western thought from Aristotle...through Locke and Kant and Hegel and Marx" (6). "If there are no principles of rhetoric or logic or poetics," he states, "then the teacher can make any decision he or she wants to—there is no appeal or reason or explanation or workability" (6).

It's true that linear logic works well for much of the writing that goes on at universities and in the so-called real world. Most professors expect straightforward communication of facts and ideas, and they grade accordingly. So among other advantages, a linear approach is the shortest route from point A (the assignment) to point B (the passing grade). Consider the business student asked to write a memo explaining his unit's lagging productivity or the nursing student asked to write up a patient's botched care. Their reports aim to accurately reflect real events in an orderly way. To suggest that they embrace disorder and take a nonlinear approach to the assignments would be absurd, and risky.

For as M. J. Mahoney says, the "traditionalist valuation of order over disorder" pervades all disciplines to the extent that in psychiatry "'mental illnesses'...are also called 'emotional disorders'" (153). Taking this reasoning to an extreme, one could say an author's chaotic writing style indicates a dysfunctional mind, even insanity. Almost as if referring to the clinical role of the writing center tutor, Mahoney observes, "The implicit and explicit priority in treatment is to eliminate the disorder (or its source) quickly and completely" (153).

There may be method in madness, however. Like Shinichi, some students object to linear order out of a strong suspicion that it not only prevents them from expressing themselves, but inadequately describes their

world. Chaos researchers confirm their suspicions. As Hayles says, "Newtonian mechanics" assumes "that linearity is the rule of nature, nonlinearity the exception. Chaos theory has revealed that in fact the opposite is true" (11). The manifold nonlinear systems in nature—including the weather—show that "Chaos is all around us, even in the swinging pendulum that for the eighteenth century was emblematic of a clockwork universe" (12).

In concert with this new scientific vision of the universe as a complex place, "rich in disorder and surprise" (Hayles 11) are artistic and literary visions that intuitively anticipated chaos theory, tapping into the richness of disorder to find new ways of looking at the world. A 1932 dialogue between Andre Masson and Henri Matisse predates chaos theory by forty years. It illustrates Masson's chaotic, self-organizing approach to art and, like Shinichi, his clash with another school of thought:

Masson explained: 'I begin without an image or plan in mind, but just draw or paint rapidly according to my impulses. Gradually, in the marks I make, I see suggestions of figures or objects. I encourage these to emerge, trying to bring out their implications even as I now consciously try to give order to the composition.'

'That's curious' Matisse replies. 'With me it's just the reverse. I always start with something—a chair, a table—but as the work progresses I become less conscious of it. By the end, I am hardly aware of the subject with which I started.' (Ades 37)

Masson's discovery of form in unplanned brush strokes—in effect, noise—resembles Paulson's portrait of how the disorder in chaotic systems generates new and sometimes meaningful patterns. Paulson defines *noise* as "perturbations that threaten to destabilize organisms, to modify their structure or undo their organization" (40). Noise becomes a creative force when it disrupts simpler structures and produces "new and more complex forms of organization" (40). This concept of order from noise likewise resembles D.K. Simonton's chance configuration model, by which diverse "mental elements thrown together by happenstance" (173) sometimes form "higher-order configurations" (176) of knowledge. Simonton cites Einstein, who

said that "'combinatory play'" with such mental elements "'seems to be the essential feature of productive thought'" (179).

The crucial role of self-organization from noise as a creative catalyst in the postmodern narrative also becomes clear as one reviews chaos-based criticism. Paulson says, "Literary texts inevitably contain elements that are not immediately decodable and...function for their readers as what information theorists call noise" (43). According to Eric Charles White, the introduction of such "confusion into a logically closed system enables the generation of alternative logics. Like a 'simple fluctuation, a chance event, a circumstance,' noise too can produce a new system of meaning" (268). Referring to Stanislaw Lem's *The Cyberiad*, Hayles says:

As chaos leads to order and order back to chaos, the narrative comes to resemble an organism that grows by periodically dissolving and reassembling, each time at a higher level of complexity. In this sense the narrative is a cybernetic organism manifesting within itself the same self-organizing principles that the stories take as their subject. (128-29)

When such postmodern works succeed, David Porush says, "literary discourse becomes a model for a kind of knowing that best communicates the 'opacity'—or at least the complex unpredictability—of the universe" (80). Indeed, saying that "Narrative linearity...is fundamentally at odds...with postmodern theories" (Hayles 285) of twentieth century culture, Hayles cites other authors whose works appear to have self-organized, or who speak of chaotic composition techniques. Like Shinichi's search for the form that is already there, Henry Adams says his pen "works for itself, and acts like a hand, modeling the plastic material over and over again to the form that suits it best" (Hayles 68). Likewise, Doris Lessing's character Anna, in *The Golden Notebook*, speaks of an invention technique much like Einstein's. Anna "play(s) with words, hoping some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want" (Hayles 261). In what is both a surrender to the hopelessness of direct communication and a declaration of freedom from convention, she adds, "The people who have been there, in the place where words, patterns, order, dissolve,

will know what I mean and the others won't" (261).

Anna is not alone in seeing chaos as liberating. White writes of the emancipating power of self-organization, saying, "As the stochastic [random] leap toward the unprecedented liberates nature from determinism, so the emergence of order out of chaos overcomes entropic degradation. Nature is thus both 'free' and 'progressive'" (264). Like nature, writers who allow their works to self-organize are free to break from logical determinism and produce new patterns of meaning. In this sense, White says, "Literature functions as the 'noise' of culture. By perturbing existing systems of meaning, it enables the invention of new ideas, and ultimately, new domains of knowledge" (269).

As Hayles points out, however, "Chaos has its frightening as well as its liberating aspects" (27). The noise that disrupts a system does not always result in self-organization, and self-organization does not always result in meaning. As Simonton acknowledges, the scientist who relies on chance configuration "must sift through a laborious parade of chance permutations before the solution to a problem is found" (186). Paulson, too, cautions that "the creation of variety is only a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for the creation of meaning. Variety that was noise in one context *can* but does not necessarily become information in a new or reorganized context" (40-41).

In other words, although a writer who adopts a postmodern approach deserves a share of the credibility that comes with being part of a recognized school, his or her work can be creative without being meaningful. To the extent that it carries meaning to a reader, or allows the reader to create his or her own meaning, it succeeds. As is true of other complex systems, however, the self-organization that sometimes leads to new meaning may as easily lead to order without meaning, or failure.

That's what makes it difficult to give advice to students blessed with nonlinear vision. As a fiction writer, I value their perspective, which, as chaos theory has shown, may mirror reality more closely than a linear perspective. As a tutor and composition teacher, however, I grow uneasy when postmodern narrative noise invades the quiet, logical world of the essay. My first urge,

ever practical, is to gently guide the student back to safe ground. This only becomes a problem when someone like Shinichi, in good faith, refuses to come.

Obviously, a solution lies somewhere between the extremes: in this case, between insisting on a strict adherence to linear order and accepting self-indulgent nonsense in the name of creativity. Sometimes, unfastening the chains of logic may only lower a student's chances of arriving at a new pattern of meaning. Research suggests, in fact, that traditional constraints are vital to the creation of new ideas. As John Campbell says, "Insight, whether scientific or aesthetic, always emerges from a knowing mind that struggles creatively with prior tradition" (60). Simon-ton, too, believes that "creativity is clearly reinforced by extensive formal training" but "requires that the young scientist not be excessively socialized into a single, narrow-minded way of associating ideas" (197-198).

Shinichi's struggle with an intolerable essay format, then, may have been a necessary part of his creative process. To him, convention itself may provide the essential creative noise. In any case, his professor's rejection of the new patterns that resulted, though possibly unfair, is hardly surprising. William R. Shadish may as well be speaking of all academic disciplines when he says, "Novel ideas are often rejected or ignored if they are outside the prevalent paradigms. Novel practices can be hard to introduce to older scientists who are set in their ways, and who influence the next generation's practices through training" (406).

As peripheral members of the academy, writing center tutors often find themselves standing outside the prevalent paradigm, looking in. Our insider-outsider status splits our loyalty between the positivist model many professors cling to and some students' legitimate postmodern yearning for new models. Students often come to us early in the composing process, when they're still vulnerable, uncertain if their approaches are valid. And so we find ourselves in the position of deciding whether, and to what degree, to nurture or inhibit deviations from a professor's assigned pattern.

That most students—and tutors—wish to play it safe makes this decision seem easy. As Wallace Chafe says, our culture provides plenty of "ready-made models we can use for dealing with new experience. . . . Only rarely...do we create brand new models to

explain a particular input, or simply for the joy of doing this" (81). One of my colleagues illustrates, however, how teachers too often contribute to the scarcity of new models. Complaining about the lack of imagination among her students, whose papers all looked alike, my colleague said, "There's almost no original thinking going on." I asked to see her assignments and found they dictated step by logical step how to structure the essays in her course.

My suggestion that she was holding her students' imaginations hostage to her own concept of order upset her. At the time, I regretted my "out of line" remark. Now I'm not so sure. As tutors, perhaps a part of our duty, and one that requires discretion, is to act as catalysts for creativity by introducing noise into the feedback loops that run between students and professors. Feedback loops occur in certain chemical reactions, Hayles explains, when

a product may also serve as a catalyst...to generate more product, which in turn becomes more catalyst. The resulting dynamics are instrumental in explaining why organized structures can spontaneously emerge from initially small perturbations" (14).

Although I have little cause for it, I hope my small perturbation made my colleague take another look at her starkly linear assignments. If not, then maybe the noise I quietly introduce into her students' ideas during tutorials will spark some of the original thinking she misses.

Meanwhile, if we alert students with non-linear perspectives to the dangers of deviating from assigned patterns, and they still wish to do so, we can help them by seeking the form within their apparently chaotic works, by reassuring them that they belong to an established school of thought, and by promoting tolerance—or at least a second reading—of their work among the faculty. All of this, of course, calls for courage and delicate judgment. As White suggests, it may mean that in our own quest to find order in complexity, "we ourselves must become improvisational artists...who live...close to the fertile chaos from which form is continually emergent" (265).

Steve Sherwood
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, TX

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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. Sponsored by "Rhetoric Radio" and the Ask Carl Writing Center Evangelistic Team, this column also appears on WCenter, the electronic forum for writing center specialists. Please send your questions, comments, and cashiers' checks to "Ask Carl," % Carl Glover, Dept. of Rhetoric and Writing, Mount St. Mary's College, Emmitsburg, MD, 21727, or via e-mail at: glover@msmary.edu

In our last column we looked at the crucial issue of what to call our student writing center workers, and we settled on "Pooh Bah" and its variants as the best, if not the only appropriate title. Look for a name change to sweep the nation. Today I want to share with you some highlights of a recent discussion on WCenter regarding another fundamental question: where on campus is the ideal location for a writing center?

Prior to offering the "Ask Carl" definitive word, the veritable logos, on this question, I noted with interest some of the suggestions offered by my network colleagues: the library, the college of business, the college of veterinary science, the school of alchemy, the health center, the student union building, a shack out back across the track from the bowling alley. Perhaps the most unusual writing center location was brought to my attention by Margaret-Rose Marek of Texas Christian who pointed out that the TCU Writing Center sits beneath the campus swimming pool and diving well. I suppose that explains why Center Director Christina Murphy issues umbrellas and bathing caps to her peer tutors (read "pooh bahs") every fall. Considering TCU's mascot, the "Horned Frogs," what better way to capture the spirit

of the school and its commitment to writing than to tutor in a submarine.

After pondering this issue, I offered the following advice: "The best place to locate a writing center is on the bank of a river. The location of a writing center is vital to the peer tutor selection process. A river is essential to the fool-proof "Ask Carl Tutor Selection Procedure." Follow this method and you can't go wrong. Put all potential tutors in a small room and have them talk incessantly and simultaneously for about three hours, or maybe four. Make sure they all get good and thirsty, but don't let them drink any water. Then take them to the bank of the nearest river and say, 'Here is water. Have a drink.' Those that get down on their bellies and drink like cattle, you don't hire. Those that dip their hands into the water and drink while remaining vigilant, hire them. They'll make good tutors. Those that refuse to drink because the water is polluted, send them to graduate school in rhetoric and composition."

Of course, this definitive word on writing center location brought mixed reactions from many such as Sharon Strand who worried that Bowling Green State was "quite a way from any significant water," and Stephen Newmann who felt the river site might set writing centers "adrift." But Barry Maid saw the wisdom of it all: "It's the best way to keep writing centers afloat."

A parting observation: Since writing centers will be placed on river banks, why not call the student workers "pier tutors?"

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

Tutorfood

Do you have an appropriate recipe or two for staff meeting refreshments? If so, please share by sending them to the newsletter.

The following recipe is highly recommended, has been taste-tested at a staff meeting at Purdue, and is offered for your enjoyment. It's easy; it's delicious; it's guaranteed to bring all serious conversation to a halt while people lick fingers and/or grab more.

English Toffee Bars

15 graham crackers (2 and 1/2" squares)

1 cup firmly packed brown sugar

1 cup butter

1 6 oz. package of chocolate chips (milk chocolate)

1/4 cup chopped nuts

- In a foil-lined 13x9 cake pan (grease the foil with butter), arrange the graham crackers. Entire bottom of pan must be covered with graham crackers.
- In a medium saucepan, combine the brown sugar and butter. Bring to a boil, and remove from the heat. Pour over graham crackers.
- Bake in 400 degree oven for five minutes. Remove and immediately sprinkle with chocolate chips, and as soon as the chips are soft, spread over the top of the cracker crust. Sprinkle with nuts. Chill at least thirty minutes or until the chocolate is set. Break into pieces of all shapes and sizes. Store covered in refrigerator.

*Marnie Petray
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana*

Midwest Writing Centers Association

Call for Papers
October 7-8, 1994
Kansas City, Missouri
"Center or Margins: Sites of Change and/or Changing Sites?"
Keynote Speaker: Nancy Grimm

Our conference theme asks us to locate ourselves as in- or outside the mainstream and to assess the limits and strengths of our current position; it also asks us to consider whether increased acceptance will lead us to redefine our role as advocates of nontraditional approaches to learning. In other words, it asks us to map out the bridges leading from boundaries to center and to test whether those bridges allow for two-way passage. The program chairs encourage proposals for individual and panel presentations, workshops, and think tanks. To submit a proposal, request and then complete the appropriate form from either Jacqueline McLeod Rogers, Writing Centre, The University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3B 2E9 (FAX: 204-786-1824) or Susan Sanders, 307 East Douglass, Houghton, MI 49931. Proposal deadline: April 30, 1994.

Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition

July 13-16, 1994
State College, Pennsylvania

To receive conference information, contact Don Bialostosky, Dept. of English, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802 (e-mail: rae2@psuvm.psu.edu).

Midwest College Learning Center Association

Call for Proposals
October 6-8, 1994
Minneapolis, MN

Deadline for proposals: May 15, 1994. Contact Rosanne G. Cook, Associate Vice President for Academic Support Services, St. Ambrose University, 518 West Locust Street, Davenport, Iowa 52803. Telephone: 319-383-8704; Fax: 319-383-8791.

Learning Assistance Association of New England

Call for Proposals
October 29, 1994
"Developmental Education=Access and Excellence"
Keynote Speaker: Marilyn Frankenstein

Contact Margaret Pobywajlo, University of New Hampshire at Manchester, 220 Hackett Hill Road, Manchester, NH 03102. Deadline: June 8, 1994.

Closing the gap

My job in the writing center had taught me to read student faces. The girl who approached me had lines of panic in her face combined with shadows of despair. I met her with a reassuring smile hoping to ward off her fears. "Could I make an appointment with a writing tutor who could help me with a paper?" she asked. The task that faced her wasn't unusual—a standard assignment issued by an English faculty member. It asked her to read a selection and then to write an essay based on her reading. "But I want to go to the lecture first," she said, "to see what the professor has to say about the reading. Then I'll write a first draft. Could I bring it in the day after?"

"Of course," I said, "we'll make an appointment...but, if you have a minute, let me give you some guidelines."

She agreed and we sat down. She planned to read the article before she went to the lecture, but she would wait to hear the professor's and other students' comments about the reading before forming her own ideas.

"Why don't you try writing down some ideas of your own as soon as you've finished reading?" I asked. "Have a notebook handy and jot down phrases that strike you as interesting, thoughts that occur to you as you're reading, connections that you make, or even questions that you have. Anyone who is able to read that article should be able to find meaning that is unique because he/she has had a different background to relate to. Give yourself credit for your own thoughts. You may have some insight that no one else in class has."

The student looked at me, a bit more at ease but still somewhat puzzled. "But I don't know what the professor wants," she countered. "I usually wait for him to lecture and have discussion. I'm scared to say anything in the discussion. Everyone knows more than I do."

"What have you got to lose?" I asked. "Try listening to your own thoughts as you read. I think you may be surprised. If you write some of those ideas down as soon as

you finish reading, or as you read, you may remember them and be able to contribute them to the discussion tomorrow, but in the meantime, you will have tried them out on paper first to see how they sound."

I wasn't sure I'd convinced her, but I have convinced myself that students need to build confidence in their own insight if they are to become thinking people. Too many students cower in the corner waiting for the professor to explain "his way," "the right way," "what he wants," without going out onto their intellectual limbs to assert, connect, conclude, question, challenge or analyze the material that is presented to them.

My advice has been studied and researched. Writing *is* a way of knowing. But my most convincing evidence comes from my own experience. When I returned to graduate school, the first course I took was a seminar on Jane Austen's work. The professor asked us to write a two-page response to the reading for each class meeting. I read, I thought, but then I struggled to write two pages on any major or minor issue I chose. I froze as the restrictions of form and focus and thesis moved in on my thinking. If only I had allowed my thoughts to fall randomly onto the paper, to forestall organization and formal form until they had had a chance to move around and get comfortable, I might have come up with some sparkling insights. That's what the professor was hoping for, I think, as I look back. But all I could think of was that she knew it all, and I had to find the key to her secrets; then I would begin to know what she knew.

How have students and teachers arrived at this game of cat and mouse—this misunderstanding? True, teachers have knowledge and understanding that students do not have. Most of their lives depend on sharing this wealth with students. Beyond this, most of them ecstatically accept any innovative thinking by their students. However, in between, the gem of true understanding is lost. It falls somewhere between the teacher's good intentions and the students' desire to please. The true understanding will occur only if the teacher allows the student to discover the truths. They may be a shade dif-

ferent from the teacher's practiced perspective, but then students can only learn in the context of their own understanding and on their own terms.

A valuable role of ours, as writing center personnel, is to build student confidence. We do it by encouraging students to think for themselves and to acknowledge that thinking as valid. Even if they are not assigned, journals and response writing can help students close the gap between their growing knowledge and their teachers' expectations.

My apprehensive student returned the next day with several pages of thoughts on the reading assignment. Some were repetitious and shallow, but others were thoughtful and held the raw material for comments to add to class discussion, for questions to ask in class, and for the assigned paper.

*Jolene Hansen
University of Wisconsin Center-
Waukesha County
Waukesha, WI*

Grammar Hotline Directory Available

Writing centers reach the world through their grammar hotlines, 65 of which are listed in the 1994 Grammar Hotline Directory, published in partnership with Houghton Mifflin. One free copy is available for a stamped, self-addressed, business-letter-size envelope addressed to Grammar Hotline Directory, Tidewater Community College Writing Center, 1700 College Crescent, Virginia Beach, VA 23456. Multiple copies are available for \$1 each, including postage and handling; inquiries go to Donna Reiss at the same address or phone (804) 427-7170.

Electronic discourse for writing consultants

Writing center consultants frequently must hold their tongues. They are trained in the art of listening; they measure their words strategically. But as much as they need to practice silence with clients, they also need to cultivate loquacity amongst themselves. Consultants who talk—who air complaints, exchange tutoring tips and successes and ask questions—are assertive and proactive, able to share responsibility with each other and with administrators for an efficient and effective center. Talking encourages fluid social interactions, and where they are not fluid, talking makes possible the negotiations that encourage fluidity. Talking, however, can be a problem when consultants seldom see one another because of different schedules or when the center is so busy that they barely have time to fill out paperwork between appointments.

I have found a solution. An electronic bulletin board can provide plenty of opportunity for valuable “talk.” A bulletin board uses an electronic mail system to send messages to all participants. Although messages might be addressed to individuals, they can be read by everyone who has access to the board, unless the sender invokes a privacy option. Messages can be sent or read at any time or place that the system being used is accessible. At the Texas A&M University English Department Writing Center we use MAIL (Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment) on Macintosh Classics. All things considered, I have found our board, which we called Staff Contact, an effective forum for discussion.

In the first semester that I used Staff Contact, which I describe in these pages, all but three of our writing consultants were enrolled in my graduate course on writing centers. Class members, who tutored two hours a week and met with me one hour a week, were required to use the board. The other three writing consultants never met with us officially, so theoretically the board provided an important avenue for them to keep in touch with us, although only one consultant, Betty, took advantage of the opportunity.

Using a board is something not all consultants are able or willing to do. Van and Joonwan (from China), not class members, read for a few days and then opted not to participate, in spite of their expressed enthusiasm. The urge to talk was apparently not able to overcome the fact that using an electronic board takes time, especially when one is new to the process, not to mention risk. One risks making errors or saying something socially inappropriate, of course, and, most frightening of all, being ignored.

Others, like Betty, did make the adjustment: “As a consultant in the Writing Center, but not a member of your class, I find Contact invaluable!” Still others were forced to adjust because their participation was a condition of class. Those who were able to express their frustrations—and they did so on Staff Contact itself—were often thus enabled to overcome them. Persistence, curiosity, and, for some, the motivation of grades, resulted in adequate electronic fluency for most and at least the ability to “listen in” for a few. Mila, who was from Russia and was still adjusting to an American university, negotiated her participation. She ventured only two messages, one apologizing for her English, even though her peers’ responses attempted to encourage her. Yet she read everything. Mila minimized the risks of a low grade and of being seen as a poor writer with her apology and her strategy of listening in.

In the relatively spontaneous and semi-formal medium of an electronic bulletin board, rhetorical skill must develop quickly. The audience is complex, including both peers and administrators and sometimes instructors, and has the potential to respond directly, to applaud, to agree, to challenge, even, as I have already mentioned, to ignore. Keeping that audience interested, providing useful, relevant, and honest feedback, and maintaining social relations that promote an effective center requires as much skill as any writer can muster. In addition, participants must strategically manipulate various levels of usage and style. The absence of intonation and facial cues in writing requires them

to cultivate tact and etiquette. Humor and irony are often misread, and anger can seem more searing when there is no softening body posture or opportunity for immediate retraction.

The problem with any bulletin board, electronic or cork, is that people read messages, if at all, at different times, sometimes as much as ten days after they are first posted. On our software, a notation is made whenever a message is opened so that writers can keep track of who has read messages, if at all, at different times, sometimes as much as ten days after they are first posted. On our software, a notation is made whenever a message is opened so that writers can keep track of who has read their messages, which gives the writer a pretty good sense of whether a message is being read. In my experience few of us read every message, except for a few technophiles, me among them. The volume of messages explains this; during the semester in question about 900 were posted. Important announcements were labeled “MUST READ,” but even with that label it could take ten days before everyone had checked in.

Examining the use of our bulletin board, I found that messages fell into one of four function categories: (1) administrative, (2) pedagogical, (3) theoretical, and (4) social. The administrative messages include anything that promotes the daily operation of the center—policy, staffing, scheduling, budgeting, announcements, and such. For example, I posted a message reminding staff to get substitutes when they had to miss a tutoring session, and Tasha requested help with a scheduling problem.

Some administrative messages suggested new ways of doing things. Jim used the board to suggest a new procedure: “I’d be willing to visit classes explaining the writing center to students and inviting them to use it. Is anyone else interested in giving a five-minute presentation to a few...classes?” As a result of Jim’s query, some of the consultants organized these pitches. Discussion of ad-

ministration may also include requests and reports on how things are going. Kay and Gary, the managing directors, used Staff Contact in the days before we opened to cheer us on. Kay started with a messages that read "From humble beginnings will come...success!" And Gary followed up with this report and request: "A personal elaboration on Kay's 'victory cry': at present things seems a bit disheveled in terms of our goals, procedures, and potential, BUT... 'Out of chaos comes order.' "

Other administrative messages elaborated on or questioned policy or procedures. In one case, Kay and I negotiated the implementation of a policy for students who missed scheduled appointments. And the private mail option provided an invaluable way for me to communicate with our graduate student administrators. They were able to notify me confidentially of sensitive problems without having to call me at home or meet with me behind closed doors during center hours. In fact, although no writing consultants did so, any of them could have contacted me privately to air a complaint. Granted, they could have simply handed me a memo, but since the board was readily available as a means of reaching me, it may have seemed a more inviting, less time-consuming vehicle.

The messages in the next category, pedagogical, provided an outlet for the frustrations and triumphs experienced when teaching in a writing center. The board's privacy allowed us to vent feelings and explore teaching in some depth, without concern over students' seeing our comments in their folders or overhearing our talk in corridors. Sometimes the discussion was abstract and general, sometimes very concrete and personal. For example, we had requests for help or information, especially for working with ESL or dyslexic students. Because of one such request, we learned that one of our writing consultants was dyslexic. His experiences brought home to us some of the problems dyslexic students have to face.

We have explanations of individual tutoring style. Ginger, for example, wrote the following:

I believe that as soon as one writes on someone else's paper, that paper is no longer the writer's piece. Instead, until the final draft is ready for publication, I've forced myself to sit on my hands

and LISTEN to the student share his or her writing. . . . If we don't keep the responsibility for "fixing" a paper with the writer, we become co-author. It's difficult to learn how to revise and edit by having someone else do it for you.

Sometimes conversations about pedagogy that were started during tutoring were continued on the board—allowing the rest of us to participate. So when Joy thanked Gary for help, we all felt that we had been informed:

I appreciate your assistance Wednesday in trying to explain to the Chinese girl why we can't always say why. I suppose I felt as if I SHOULD be able to explain why—somehow. But—for those others interested in this dialogue—as you so eloquently stated—English is filled with subtleties and nuances that are sometimes unexplainable.

We were interested in our special roles as writing consultants. In this regard, a discussion of writer's block prompted Ed to mention a problem we came to call tutor's block: "Is this a common cause of anxiety among tutors...that advice, once heeded, will be undercut on the whim of the instructor in the classroom?" Ed's double question marks underscore his desire for others to respond, and the fact that he so frankly admits anxiety shows that he will value those responses. A reassuring response did come from Jim, who confessed he "worr[ie]d] that I am leading my students and my Writing Center clients in the wrong direction."

I brought up Ed's and Jim's comments during class, and they elicited a great deal of earnest response. Often comments made on the board can be a starting point for further face-to-face discussion, in small or large groups, in a class or a meeting. Usually the topics brought up electronically are those that are of interest to particular writing consultants, ones they have pondered or encountered in their daily work in the center; thus they are superior as topics that stimulate thoughtful consideration.

Finally, just as we have seen administrative messages boost our spirits, pedagogical messages at times urged us on. One success, shared by Joy, gave me a good feeling about the progress of our writing consultants:

A tutee came in the other day so nervous that his hands were trembling.

Nothing calmed him down, and I had no idea what to do because he had no material, no ideas about his assignment, nothing written. . . . When he saw for himself that his ideas were the same ones that—gasp—a tutor had, his confidence zoomed.

That Joy was willing to tell us about this experience signifies her own growing confidence as a writing consultant.

Overlapping with discussions of pedagogy are discussions of theory, mostly stemming from readings assigned in my graduate class. Many centers require or suggest readings that would encourage similar dialogue. In any case, the bulletin board is a good place for writing consultants to apply what they get from their reading to their local situation. Some fairly good discussions of reading occurred on the board, although they were not of the depth or quality usually reached in a three-hour graduate seminar. For example, one of our most extended discussions, on error, was sparked by *Errors and Expectations*. Gary directly questioned the value of Shaughnessy's text to the Texas A&M center. "I wonder if Shaughnessy sees any value in what we hope to do with our writing center," he wrote. "I'm not certain that we will be spending much time in analyzing errors—certainly not to the extent she does. . . . I see the value in this text but not as a sourcebook for the kinds of tasks we normally face as writing consultants." Larry responded that "Shaughnessy's point about error analysis is that the basic writer's errors are not infinite and are rule bound. If a student is a regular user of the writing center, there is great potential for error analysis."

Not everyone agreed on the potential for doing error analysis in our center, but a lengthy and revealing discussion of error ensued. A message on error sent by Jim asking if "grammar errors can be overlooked if the central 'message' in the essay...is obvious" got nine responses. Ed urged overlooking errors "IF overemphasizing such errors has a chilling effect on the students' self-esteem and willingness to express themselves through writing." Another writing consultant invoked the rhetorical concepts of ethos, good will, and clarity, and two mentioned the differences between expectations for technical writing and freshman composition.

The messages about error did contain a few humorous asides, as when Kay observed

that "all these messages about errors are fraught with scribal irregularities." Such joking was typical of the last category, the social. Writing centers are frequently places where those tutoring in the mornings never see those tutoring in the afternoons. With a bulletin board, they can still exchange social pleasantries, contributing to a sense of camaraderie and providing another avenue by which they might become acquainted. This impulse should be encouraged, as it not only fulfills a social need but also helps writing consultants become comfortable with this special form of communication. In fact, Gary recognized this phenomenon early on: "I suppose 'fooling around' is, in fact, an inescapable consequence of placing a tool/toy such as this at the disposal of creative folks like us. I don't see it as necessarily bad, do you? Practice makes perfect—especially in communication. I gurgled and giggled long before I spoke my first intelligible word."

There were a few difficult encounters. In one instance, a message intended as a request for feedback on a pedagogical matter was read as a criticism. The importance of the pedagogy was submerged by the drama of social relations being played out publicly. The end result was that the participants, although they did not essentially alter their original positions, did, in the process of negotiation, reconsider some of their practices. The problem started with a message which was certainly not as tactful as it could have been; it mentioned by name another writing consultant, who was also a classroom teacher:

I tutored a student of [consultants' name] yesterday who seemed embarrassed about the paper she had gotten back. Whenever I read aloud what she had written she appeared to realize that parts of it didn't make sense, and once she said "I know it's bad." But parts of it weren't so bad and so I tried to offset the "bad" by emphasizing the good parts. It seems to me students like this need a big dose of self-confidence. Any ideas about how teachers and tutors can foster more self-confidence in students?

Interestingly, the writer of this message thought it non-threatening and felt comfortable bringing up this problem in a public forum. However, the teacher/tutor to whom she refers wrote a long and somewhat angry response, including this excerpt: "As far as

confidence building goes, I like to think I am pretty good at it. I pet, coo, and stroke as much as the law will allow. I praise, laud, and applaud as much as my conscience will allow. . . . By the way, do I seem a bit defensive here?"

The original writer's reply begins harshly but finally eases into a stance of compromise:

Yes, you sound extremely defensive; now allow me the same posture. When I made the remarks about how we all could build self-confidence in students I was in no way implying that you weren't doing just that. In fact in not directing the question to you in particular, I was intentionally not trying to make it seem as if I was accusing you of anything. Please forgive me for publicly labeling you as the student's teacher. . . . I...appreciate it immensely when my own teachers take the time to write a lot of comments about my writing. I'm sure your student did, too. The focus of my message, in my mind, was on the student's saying her writing was "bad," but I see now how it might have sounded like I was connecting her supposed lack of confidence with your actions as a teacher.

Recognizing the tactlessness of naming the teacher, yet sticking to her original point, allowed this writer to negotiate an acceptable peace. She also acknowledged the difficulty of expression via writing, the gulf between what we have "in mind" and what our reader perceives. The incident was resolved without my intervention, a lesson for me in handing authority to consultants just as we ask them to hand authority to writers.

I have shown, I hope, that an electronic bulletin board provides a valuable and unique forum for talk among writing center consultants. Over the course of a semester, I learned quite a bit about optimizing a board's use. I will turn next to some hints about setting up an electronic board. Probably the two most important considerations are ease of access to computers and user-friendly software. Without both, I see little chance of success. Ideally, writing consultants should be able to use the board from home or from various computer labs around campus, at night and on weekends as well as during center hours.

A bulletin board does add another burden to center directors in that staff must be trained to use it. Adequate training is worth the time, since it will go a long way toward assuring the greatest use of the board. The more user-friendly the software (and the hardware on which it runs), the easier training will be. To supplement a training session, it would be wise to offer individualized help to those unfamiliar with computers. And keep documentation in an accessible spot for reference.

A board worth reading requires participation, and getting consultants into the habit of checking weekly for important announcements will also encourage most to go beyond that requirement and become engaged with the "conversations." To encourage regular reading, consultants who work ten hours or more a week should be given time, perhaps an hour a week, away from other duties.

A board dedicated to writing center staff should have as its primary purpose the encouragement of social interaction. Writing consultants who have access to each other's views will be challenged as well as supported, will be called upon to defend themselves or others, to apologize, to criticize, to encourage, to listen, to applaud—in short, they will be immersed in a small universe where they negotiate the rules for acceptable discourse. Gary concluded his tutoring journal with a comment on how all our electronic talk affected his perception of his writing:

I honestly feel my writing improved significantly this semester. Much of this is directly related to the [software] we used in class. I seldom compose at a keyboard—because I don't touch-type, mostly—but doing so on a regular basis helps one express more...economically. . . . Another reason for the improvement might be the nature of the conversations I had to respond to. We have some wonderful electronic dialogues this semester."

Our "wonderful electronic dialogues" bound us together as a group, kept us in "CONTACT," and encouraged us to be responsible to each other as well as to our clients.

Valerie Balester
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX

TUTORS' COLUMN

Teaching assistants learn teaching tips by tutoring

Several years ago, the Second National Conference on the Training and Employment of Teaching Assistants, subtitled "Preparing the Professoriate of Tomorrow for Teaching: Enhancing the TA Experience," was held in Seattle. The main focus of the conference was on preparing graduate students, from all disciplines and departments on campuses across the country, to teach. Most graduate students attending the conference felt enthusiastic about teaching, but underprepared for the rigors of the classroom.

I attended the conference as a teaching assistant from Washington State University and discovered that the teaching preparation I received as a TA in the English department was substantial compared to that of other graduate teaching assistants at the conference. A major component of my training was through the WSU Writing Lab, an education center which provides free tutorial services helping students and faculty become better writers and graduate students become better teachers.

Each graduate TA in the English department tutors for one hour a week for the first three semesters of his or her TA appointment. The Writing Lab also provides an internship offering TAs graduate credit for synthesizing the tutorial philosophy with pedagogical issues. As a TA intern I developed a handbook for the training of tutors. Two pages of the handbook were anecdotes from my experience as a tutor recast as questions asking tutors-in-training "what would you do if you encountered this student and this scenario?" The questions were followed by possible ways a tutor might have handled the situation; the "answers" were a result of a semester's worth of experimenting with various student-related issues and finding what worked best for me.

One of the most memorable experiences I had as a tutor was when a young woman hit

the desk with her fist, turned crimson and shouted at me because I suggested a revision strategy that she felt was too time-consuming. Fortunately, the young woman was a frequent visitor to the Writing Lab so I eventually learned how to defend myself, first by listening quietly while she vented her emotions (and not taking her rage personally), and later, by sending her away and asking her to come back when she could be civil.

The Writing Lab provides TAs with exposure to a variety of students ranging from students so frustrated that they cannot be dealt with in the Lab to students so enthusiastic that they are recruited as tutors. Students from other countries, and from diverse cultures within this country, help TAs discover the most effective way to teach the rhythms of Edited American English. A good number of undergraduates give TAs an introduction to issues of motivation: what is the best way to encourage disinterested students to care as much about solving cultural problems as going skiing the coming weekend? Yesterday I grappled with how to interest a student in a topic from his World Civilizations course while he insisted he cared more about his new ski jacket. A fellow tutor who overheard our conversation offered this tactical question: "What did they wear skiing in Medieval Europe?"

The Lab presents learning as an enjoyable, social activity. Students are encouraged to wrestle with ideas together and the atmosphere of the Lab is more like a Bohemian coffee house than a university facility. For the last two semesters the Writing Lab has even had a "Writing Lab Baby." Graduate students who juggle parenting, teaching, and studying find the Writing Lab a comfortable place to bring an infant while they either are tutored or tutoring.

In addition to tutoring while in the Lab, TAs help each other with papers and presen-

tations for the courses they are taking and work together on generating better writing assignments for their own students. TAs are better prepared to create assignments that challenge and interest students after seeing what assignments work and don't work from a myriad of other courses. TAs in conversation with other TAs also begin to norm their standards; students working with other students sharing ideas and preparing and revising writing assignments appreciate the value of their instruction more when their teachers have common evaluative standards.

By offering inexperienced teachers the opportunity to respond to student diversity as well as student writing assignments—without having to be responsible for the entirety of classroom management—the Washington State University Writing Lab provides a model for TA programs looking for an effective way to educate teachers. The training of TAs in the Writing Lab is also cost effective: TAs working as tutors in the Lab do so for educational enrichment and graduate credit rather than cash.

Tutoring and teaching are similar endeavors, but in the WSU Writing Lab tutoring and teaching differ in one profound sense: tutors do not have authority over student writing. The Writing Lab's practice of conversational, non-authoritarian tutoring exposes teachers to the educational impact they can have as peers rather than as distanced professionals. Narrowing the distance between teacher and student solidifies community, enhances collaboration, and chips away at old "Ivory Tower" attitudes that have valued learning in isolation for far too long.

Lisa Johnson-Shull
Washington State University
Pullman, WA

“Don’t make me think!”

During the last weeks of the semester, we in the Writing Center see a number of desperate students who have never appeared before. Tired and hollow-eyed, they toss a paper on the desk and ask us to proofread it before they turn it in next period. We can see the panic rise in their faces as we reply that we do not proofread but that if they read the paper to us, we can give them feedback so they can improve the paper. Resigned to their fate, they haltingly begin to read.

When we question a statement or the organization of the material, we get a blank look. Any suggestion concerning major revision—the clarity of a statement or the order of ideas—meets a reluctance (inability?) to understand. Eventually, we get a flat refusal to make such substantial changes. After all, it’s due next period: “Just tell me if I have any grammar errors.”

When we question a spelling or, heaven forbid, the lack of an apostrophe, the Frazzled One waits patiently for the dictation which will correct the sin. When he hears no such command, the student wallows in his ignorance, pleading exhaustion, begging for pity. Any attempt to make him think for himself meets defeat: “Don’t make me think; just help me!”

What then can the writing advisor do? More often than not, we succumb to the plea and merely concentrate on the grammar and/or punctuation by giving blunt indications: “Doesn’t that sentence need a comma?” or “Where’s the verb that goes with the subject of that sentence?” Sometimes that works, sometimes not.

As a result, the student believes we are cruel, even sadistic. Suggestions that coming earlier would have resulted in a better paper fall on dead ears. After all, we are the traitors, the ones who refused assistance in their half hour of need. Even so, hope springs eternal. As he leaves, he turns and asks: “Don’t you think I should get an A on this paper?” We will probably never see that student again.

So, my question is: What *can* we do? Despite a central location, signs and posters, descriptions in the course information documents, even specific urgings from instructors, many students ignore the Writing Center until desperation drives them to The Last Resort. Instructors tell us that they list us as a source when they give specific assignments, yet all too often we have had to report that only one, maybe two (if any) of their students ever showed up. Those who do appear give favorable reports, but toward the end of the semester we rarely see a new face unless it asks for an available computer or has lost all hope of a decent grade.

What can a body do? If we knew the cause of the problem, we might know the solution. Why do these students ignore a facility designed to help them? Is the problem related to the complaint we hear from instructors that the students seem even less motivated than they have ever seemed before? We are a community college, but we have noted with dismay the increasing number of empty parking spaces as the semester grows older. But how does the dropout rate affect our Suffering Soul?

Is this more than a Writing Center problem? Are we seeing the results of the public school system which has received intensive criticism these past years? Or are we seeing the results of the “me” generation, the generation accused of seeking only to gratify itself and ignoring its children in the race for the almighty dollar? Is this a nationwide problem rather than a campuswide problem? What can we do? Inquiring minds want to know.

*Marion Linehan
Tarrant County Junior College
Hurst, TX*

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations (WCAs)

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 7-8: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Kansas City, MO
Contact: Jaqueline McLeod Rogers, Writing Centre, The University of Winnepeg, 515 Portage Avenue, Winnepeg, Manitoba, Canada R3B 2E9 or Susan Sanders, 307 East Douglass, Houghton, MI 49931

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)

Training tutors to read technical writing

Most of the tutors in our writing center are undergraduates with majors or minors in English or English Education, degree programs that require only fifteen credits of introductory science and mathematics courses. Yet, many of the tutees who come to the center for help with their writing are students enrolled in advanced science, industrial technology, business, or nursing courses. Consequently, the tutors need to learn how to read the academic discourse of technical disciplines so that they may help their tutees develop as writers.

The tutors are most apprehensive about technical prose, so the first step in training the tutors to read the work of their peers is to address the tutors' anxieties. To do so, we give them a short questionnaire:

For each statement, use Y, N, and S for "Yes," "No," and "Sometimes." If you don't know, use a question mark.

- Do you enjoy reading technical prose?
- Do you think of yourself as a technical writer?
- Do you like to work with computers?
- Do you enjoy the study of mathematics?
- Do you enjoy the study of the natural and physical sciences?
- Do you watch television programs focused on the natural and physical sciences?
- Do you read books or magazines devoted to the latest scientific and technical discoveries?

We then ask the tutors to share their responses with other tutors in large or small group discussions to get the fears out in the open. Since ignorance breeds fear and since the discussion can work to inform the tutors of the value of technology, the discussion

can help students feel more at ease with technical prose. Too, we believe it helps for the tutors to know that the trainer and their peers are sensitive to their fears. While students will still be anxious after verbalizing their fears of technology, they will be more likely to be open-minded to a discussion of technical prose once their fears have been stated openly.

The next step in the training process is to provide the tutors with a short, highly technical passage to practice with. For example, we might give them the following paragraph taken from an article titled "Fat Replacers Integral to New Food Formulas" in the June 15, 1992 issue of *Chemical and Engineering News*:

Fat replacers are being used as major ingredients in many salad dressings, mayonnaise, and dairy-type products. Most fat replacer systems can be combined with other dry ingredients and then mixed with water. Alternatively, they may be prepared first as a gel or creme under the necessary mixing or heating conditions, and then added to the food product. For example, Stellar, an acid-modified cornstarch, requires high shear to make its particles adsorb water and form a shortening-like gel. (34)

The tutors read the passage and try to pick out the verbs/action words in the sentences provided. Then we ask them to summarize the movement in the text. For example, in our sample passage, tutors might note that the bulk of the verbs indicate one item is added to another to form a third. They might then relate the concept of replacement to addition. We encourage the tutors to ask tutees to define any verbs that the tutors find confusing or difficult. Thus, a tutor might ask for a definition of "prepared" in the context given, and then try to relate the definition to the notion of addition.

After the tutors know how action words function in technical texts, we ask them to focus on the nouns that appear in the text.

The goal is to get definitions from tutees (or trainers who pretend to be tutees in the training session) for nouns not understood and to relate the nouns to the action in the passages read. Tutors learn that as tutees define the nouns that they have used for the tutors unfamiliar with these concepts, the tutees discover details missing from their writings. That is, as tutors struggle to understand the technical prose out loud for their tutees, the tutees come to understand better the complexity of the concepts present and the need to develop their language more fully.

Once the tutors feel comfortable with the verbs and the nouns in the passage, we ask them to attempt a metaphoric or analogical description of the paragraph. Tutors are trained to present these metaphors to the tutees for evaluation. For example, a tutor might ask a tutee who produced the sample passage if it would be correct to say that fat replacer systems are to high fat foods what hair replacement systems are to bald heads. Tutors learn that the discussion of the applicability of the metaphors created helps the tutee to see cause/effect, if/then, and similar relationships in their writings. Often tutees find the explained metaphors themselves useful additions to their writings.

When the tutors have practiced analysis of the active, nominative, and metaphoric elements of a few technical passages, they feel ready to tutor those peers who bring technical prose to them. They understand that their lack of knowledge of the subject matter may require a particular approach to the tutoring session, but does not hinder their ability to help students to develop better writings. They discover that the means used to understand technical prose of their peers helps them to better comprehend all writing, and most employ the analytical methods learned to readings for their own classes, as well as for tutoring sessions with academic prose within their own disciplines.

Bonnie Hain
Southeastern Louisiana University
Hammond, LA

Job Listings

Adelphi University: Director of the University Learning Center

Adelphi University seeks an experienced, imaginative professional to serve as Director of the University Learning Center. The Center is an essential resource to students across the curriculum and particularly during the first year of the University's general education curriculum.

Reporting to the Dean of Academic Attainment, the Director leads and coordinates the development of a comprehensive program of learning support for the University; maintains and expands tutoring to collaborative learning in introductory classes to course recitations; provides leadership in integrating computer software and technology into the learning resources of the University; oversees the hiring and training of learning assistants, and where appropriate, of Faculty in establishing learning pedagogy. This is a full-time, 12-month position.

Candidates must have an advanced degree in a field appropriate to the responsibilities of the position; significant supervisory experience; demonstrated interest in innovative teaching and learning strategies; superior written and oral communication skills; substantive technical knowledge of computer use. Candidates should submit a resume, a cover letter outlining the candidate's views on the role of learning resources in the curriculum, and the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of at least five references.

Materials should be sent to Dr. Harvey S. Wiener, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, Adelphi U., Garden City, NY 11530. Adelphi is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer M/F.

Owens Community College: Writing Center Director

Owens Community College, Toledo, OH, has reopened the search for a full-time Manager of the Toledo Campus Writing Center. Owens is a public, state-assisted, two-year institution with over 50 programs in Arts & Sciences, Business, Public Service, Health, Industrial and Engineering Technologies. The position reports to the Dean of General Education. Excellent benefit package, with salary based on education and experience.

Requirements include a Master's degree in English, Composition/Rhetoric, or related area; experience in teaching college composition; and experience in a writing center or comparable venue. Desired qualifications include writing-across-the-curriculum, supervisory and budgeting experience. Application should specifically address how you meet the above minimum qualifications.

Required application form should be requested from (419) 661-7230 and mailed, with cover letter, resume, three letters of reference and copy of transcripts to: Human Resources Office / Owens CC / PO Box 10,000 / Toledo OH 43699-1947. Application review began on April 15, 1994, and will continue until the position is filled.

THE WRITING LAB

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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