THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Volume 19, Number 10 | Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing | June, 1995

...FROM THE EDITOR...

June is the time for closing up shop. Classes end, students look forward to summer leisure, and we make lists of things to do for fall. On that list, try to include the 2nd (Inter)National Writing Centers Association conference, September 28-30, in St. Louis. If you need registration information, contact Eric Hobson, St. Louis College of Pharmacy, 4588 Parkview Place, St. Louis, MO 63110-1088; 314-367-8700, ext. 244; fax: 314-367-2784; e-mail: ehobson@medicine. wustl.edu. Eric and his committee have put together a program which "integrates the best of writing center interaction—one-to-one and collaborative situations." Meet you in St. Louie, Louie....

And in October, we can continue our conversations at the National Peer Tutoring in Writing Conference, in Muncie, Indiana. For information, contact Cindy Johanek, Writing Center, Ball State, Muncie, Indiana 47306; 317-285-8535.

The newsletter is also shutting down for the summer and will resume with the September issue. In the interval, I wish us all a few quiet months for rejuvenation, relaxation, and maybe even enough time to finish about one-fourth of that summer "to do" list.

• *Muriel Harris, editor*

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Writing center instruction: Fostering an ethic of caring

Many current composition theorists find a great degree of compatibility between feminist pedagogy and modern composition. And for those writing specialists who attempt to apply the principles of feminist teaching to their writing instruction, writing centers provide ideal locations for such practice. The power balance between tutor and student shifts more equitably as the student writer has greater control over the agenda, specifically, as Stephen North writes, concerning "timing and motivation." Particularly in the area of response to student writing and its evaluation, writing center instruction offers possibilities for establishing what feminist ethicist Nel Noddings calls an "ethic of caring." Within this ethic of responsibility, writing center instruction fulfills the promise of liberatory education in a number of ways, providing opportunities for both students and tutors to more fully realize their potential for learning together. This is, for many of us, the greatest strength of feminist theory—that is, the degree to which it is firmly grounded in praxis, the idea that theory alone is useless unless we can use it to change the world. And that is how I apply feminist pedagogy to instruction in

writing: to use it to provide the best, most effective instruction possible for our students.

Writing centers vary a great deal from campus to campus, adapting as they should to the particular needs of each campus's students, teachers, and community. But, most of all—and ideally—our centers exist as places where students go to discuss their writing—at any stage, and possibly, for some particularly anxious students, all stages; most of us do not view our centers as places where students go only to receive remedial attention, nor do we view them as fix-it sites where students go just to get help with mechanics or grammar, nor do we see them as places of last resort where classroom teachers send those students they've "given up on." These limited perspectives of writing centers have been well-discussed already in articles such as Stephen North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" and in Suzanne Powers' "What Composition Teachers Need to Know about Writing Centers." So I'd like to begin on common ground that writing centers function ideally as places of learning, where writers—students as well as tutors—continue to learn more and more about writing and learning.

With this firm and broad pedagogical purpose established, I'd like to outline some basic principles of feminist education and then show how writing centers are able to fulfill them quite successfully.

Recent research into the ways in which gender affects the reading process, methods of learning, writing styles and so on are beginning to provide us with considerable evidence that all of these activities—reading, writing, learning—vary considerably according to the gender of the student (the writer) or the gender of the teacher (the reader). The still very popular best-seller by Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand*, strikes an echoing chord with readers who readily grasp its message: that men and women are socialized within different cultures and consequently come to value and respond to different communication styles. Carol Gilligan's work, *In a Different Voice*, shows us quite clearly how men and women develop somewhat different value systems regarding moral judgments. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule in *Women's Ways of Knowing* open our eyes to the difficulties of women having to adjust their own learning styles to a traditionally masculine orientation within the education system. These are just a few of the many studies that demonstrate that for many reasons—none of them apparently biological—people, being as different as we are, learn in different ways.

For many of us engaged in teaching, feminist education offers not just a way to teach *women* more effectively; rather, it offers a vision of education that asks both teachers and students to recognize that there are idiosyncratic differences in learning styles and that possibly the best approach for *everyone* is one that is *different* for everyone, an approach that seeks to individualize learning, to make each student and teacher subjects rather than objects. Within that vision of ideal education for all is the overt awareness and acknowledgment that various factors, particularly social ones such as gender, race, class, economic or educational background, play a considerable role in everyone's learning and teaching processes.

Many of the metaphors used to describe feminist education are maternal ones. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule depict the midwife teacher as a counter-balance to the more traditional "banking" teacher described so vividly by Paulo Freire. The midwife teacher seeks to help her students deliver new understanding and knowledge through an interchange of ideas or negotiation rather than by merely depositing information into students' minds. The researchers describe the kind of teacher most valued by their female subjects as one "who would help them articulate and expand their latent knowledge" (217). These students, according to their researchers, want a system of learning not where "knowledge flow[s] in only one direction, from teacher to student" (217) but rather one where teachers could "assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it" (217).

Belenky and her co-researchers call on another theorist, Sara Ruddick, to explain how "maternal thinking" guides the feminist teacher's approach. Ruddick

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believes that "the primary concern" of these teachers "is preservation of the vulnerable child," and secondly "to foster the child's growth" (218). These teachers, called connected teachers by Belenky, most of all "support the evolution of their students' thinking" (218), recognizing the importance of process. Moreover, these teachers tend to "focus not on their own knowledge (as the lecturer does) but on the students' knowledge" (218).

Another key element in a connected learning situation is the importance of dialogue between students and teachers. Belenky and her group cite Freire again as they remind readers that true education can only take place within a dialogue, that it is within a dialogue, as teachers and students "think and talk together" that "their roles merge" (219), and with this merger comes a new partnership that Freire describes as teachers learning from students, students learning from students, students learning from teachers. Collaborative learning thus takes on central importance, not just collaboration among students but among all active participants.

An obvious byproduct of this kind of feminist education is a shift in the power structure. If teachers are learning from students as well as vice versa, if teachers and students are truly collaborators and partners in learning, then power must shift proportionately from the teacher to the student, increasing the students' own responsibility toward his or her education, thus *empowering* the student and adding weight to his or her status as a learning partner.

The metaphors of mothering and nurturing do not, of course, privilege one gender over another. Rather, those theorists who emphasize such perspectives find many parallels between the role of parents and that of teachers. Nel Noddings, a feminist philosopher, writes about an ethic of care which is, she suggests, the basis for all human relationships. This ethic of care has a dual purpose and consists of a dyad that includes two partners: the one-caring and the one-cared-for. This dyad constitutes the essence of all human relationships, according to Noddings (1). In the educational setting, she aligns this ethic of care with what she calls "moral" education in which teachers recognize the impossibility of being objective, of regarding one's students as objects. If one cannot reduce students, human beings, to the status of objects, it becomes necessary then to admit that one of the most powerful things teachers can do for their students is to *care* for them as individuals, as subjects not objects, and to recognize that many of our evaluations are indeed based on subjective criteria, criteria that defy current educational and psychological paradigms of assessment.[1]

Noddings writes that moral education comes about through three means: dialogue, practice, and confirmation (182). We can look briefly at the ways in which writing center instruction fulfills those three. She cautions that dialogue must be central to the students' needs and wishes in order to be effective. Topics for discussion should be focused clearly on issues of concern to the student. Within this dialogue, the teacher's role is not only that of listener but also speaker; Noddings writes: "The purpose of dialogue is to come into contact with ideas and to understand, to meet the other and to care" (186). The writing center clearly offers excellent opportunities for dialogues between students and tutors regarding student writing as well as many other topics of interest to both.

Furthermore, Noddings argues that knowledge gained through dialogue must be put into practice in order to have validity in the student's life. This of course calls for opportunities to use that knowledge in real life settings which the writing center can offer: many students, feeling comfortable enough with the non-threatening atmosphere, often bring "real-life" work into the center in addition to the writing they do for English classes. Some bring resumes; others bring letters of application for jobs or other schools; sometimes they bring letters to important people in their lives—lovers, parents, siblings, teachers; occasionally they bring projects from their own jobs; and they certainly bring work for classes in other disciplines. The connecting thread among all of these situations is that they represent writing with purposes other than satisfying school criteria; these kinds of writing often result in life changes, demonstrating concretely the role writing can play for life.

The third element of moral education is that of confirmation, in which teachers confirm the student's progress toward his or her goals. It is at this point that writing center staff can best apply the principles of feminist teaching by responding as one reader among many, offering the immediacy of a committed reader in non-threatening, non-judgmental ways. An additional bonus for writing center contexts is that the relationship between tutor and student *outside* the grading context is closer to real life than the classroom. As children, students are not graded by their parents or siblings or grandparents or clergy or neighbors or their friends; the only relationship in which they are graded is their educational partnership. As adults, they will not often, if ever, be graded again; they will be evaluated by supervisors, promoted or not on their jobs, but not graded "objectively." Noddings writes clearly about the difficulties of evaluating students within the constrictive environment of most educational systems:

> The great difficulty is in grading, which is an intrusion upon the relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for. Here is a demand that both know to be an intrusion. The teacher does not grade to inform the student. She has far better, more personal ways to do this. She grades to inform others about the student's progress. Others establish standards, explicitly or implicitly, and they charge her to report faithfully in observance of those standards.

> Now the teacher is torn between obligation to the employing community and faithfulness to the student. Is this conflict resolvable? (193-4)

No, not within most of our tradition-bound institutions. But even on those campuses still immune to radical educational changes, the writing center offers an excellent opportunity for *confirming* the progress of our students *outside* the restrictive and troublesome confines of grades.

Writing centers provide excellent laboratories for feminist education in essential ways. First of all, the student makes the decision to come to the center. In this way, she demonstrates that she is in control of her own writing and educational goals; the motivation is her own, not her teacher's. She takes a step to request instruction or feedback or advice and goes to the center where she finds a recognized authority, waiting to help. She also makes decisions about what particular kinds of help she needs. She may approach a writing center tutor with a request for a reader to help her determine if she has focused adequately and clearly on a unifying thesis for her essay. Or she may seek out additional instruction on documentation guidelines for her research. Maybe she has a nearly completed paper ready to submit to her teacher but feels she needs an "expert" to review it for comma splices, a problem she's aware she has sometimes but may still be struggling to identify in her own work. In all these situations, the student is the driving force, the person in charge, the one who decides that instruction is needed, and she is clearly the subject upon whom the tutor focuses.

From the tutor's perspective, she has a ready opportunity to practice the kind of connected teaching as outlined by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule. The tutor is able, through a dialogue with the student, to draw out the knowledge the student has and help her apply it to the situation. As a reader, the tutor may feed back to the student writer her own impressions and responses, not in a judgmental way but as a natural outgrowth of that context. The student can then choose to consider that feedback—or not—with no penalty as a result of deciding against the tutor's advice. In other words, if the writing center tutor can respond and instruct without the additional power constrictions of having to grade that student's work, the result is a more natural exchange, a more logical exchange as well from a rhetorical perspective. If the purpose of our pedagogy is to help students develop into better writers, then that should be our primary focus. The writing center can free us from the additional and often distracting burden of having to rank our students against others, not for their own benefit but for the benefit of the institution. Without the artificial grading context, responding to student writing, providing additional instruction as the need arises or as the student requests it, creates a much more natural situation, one more akin to the "real world" that students will eventually be writing within.

To return to the elements of feminist education that I outlined earlier, I would like to sum up how we in our respective writing centers are contributing:

1) *Process*: First of all, our writing centers are strongly committed to the notion of writing (and of course reading and learning in general) as an on-going process. Our students bring to us work in progress at various stages: inventing, drafting, revising, editing, agonizing, whining, crying . . ., but occasionally exulting as two of our students did recently. Pleased with the outcome of their papers, and convinced that the outcome was a direct result of the help and advice of writing center staff, they returned to *confirm*—to use Nodding's term—our own teaching and show their appreciation.

2) *Dialogue*: Secondly, implicit in stories such as these is the knowledge that the learning that apparently took place was also the result of an effective dialogue between student and tutor. But it's also important to note that the dialogue was begun *by* the student, not by the tutor. Moreover, there was a willingness on both sides not only to listen but to contribute valuable input.

3) *Subjectivity*: A third key factor in this writing center/feminist pedagogy is the recognition that each learning situation is focused on the student; the student is clearly the subject of the investigation. Included in that subjective focus are all the factors that she and the tutor feel are relevant to that particular context. Perhaps the student is dealing with previous experiences of writing that led her to abort her words before they could be articulated. Or perhaps the student is struggling with a topic that she is struggling with because of past personal experiences of her own. The tutor may recall her own experiences with writing that have relevance to the particular context and share them as one writer to one another. At any rate, the tutor focuses on the student's writing at that moment and helps her to consider what factors may or may not be relevant to this particular situation. Most important of all, focusing on tutors and students as subjects highly individualizes and contextualizes the learning situation.

4) *Collaboration*: A fourth element of feminist education present in writing center instruction is the recognition of the collaborative nature of the exchange in which there is a negotiation of language. There is feedback from a real reader who helps the writer to

understand her own evolving draft through possible discontinuities in her own text. The immediacy of an audience helps the student writer realize her purpose more readily when feedback comes so promptly and logically.

5) *Power relationships*: A final factor that I would like to stress because I believe it is the most important deals with the inherent power structure of the learning dyad. The learning moment is driven by student's motivation, not by the writing center tutor. However, that motivation is readily shared by the tutor who is quickly brought into the picture. The tutor then focuses on what the *student* identifies as her need; intervention comes *when* the student decides and at what point in the process she deems it necessary. Furthermore, without the requirement of placing grades on papers read in the writing center, much of the authoritarian nature of the traditional student/ instructor relationship is removed. Writers and readers may read and discuss the writing as equals, both concerned with the success of the written text.

Historically, writing centers have migrated from the edges of campus life to the very heart of those campuses in many cases. Whether it was born in the small, dark corner of a basement classroom or in a little-used storage closet, the writing center on many campuses has taken the lead in providing the kind of caring—and, yes, nurturing—teaching that our students need as developing writers. The kind of context I've described sounds very much like the "ideal writing classroom" described by Peggy McIntosh and Elizabeth Minnich in Olivia Frey's article:

> What would make possible this ideal relationship of the student to writing and of the instructor to the student? The writer described above is not blocked or terrified, nor deadened, nor divorced from the process of writing. She is intellectually and emotionally limber in the presence of the assignment. She produces writing which the instructor has time and motivation to follow closely. Both are interested, perhaps even enjoying themselves, in the process which feels to the student more like self-development than like "English." The course is student-centered and focused on the student's writing. The teacher acts not as a corrector of bad writing, but as a more experienced co-speaker and co-writer. (94)

Providing a liberatory environment for developing writers, our writing centers are underrated leaders in achieving the highest goals of both composition and feminist pedagogy.

Betty Garrison Shiffman
Jefferson Community College
Louisville, KY

End Notes

[1]Many people are resistant to the notion of teaching as nurturing or caring, for some reason — possibly because we resist the image of self-sacrificing, self-denying devotee. However, Noddings makes clear that these relationships are mutually satisfying. We do not care for others out of purely altruistic motives; we care or nurture or do good because ultimately we reap some benefit, some gain to ourselves, some sense of self-satisfaction. Also, it may be that many who object to the terms "maternal" or "nurturing" mistakenly equate those terms with images of softness or permissiveness, as the opposite of being committed to standards of excellence. But, in reality, those most successful nurturers in our lives — mothers, fathers, grandparents, teachers, clergy — generally are caring enough to foster our growth and development through high expectations and encouragement. Nurturing does not have to equal pampering.

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News from the National Writing Centers Association: Writing Centers and the 4Cs Conference

Writing centers were much in evidence at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, held March 23-25 in Washington D.C. The conference began (for many of us) with a WCenter breakfast at Nathan's in Georgetown. Approximately 60 WCenter enthusiasts met to talk, exchange buttons and pins, and introduce themselves to each other before dining on some of Washington's best waffles and Eggs Benedict.

On Friday, March 24, Christina Murphy chaired the NWCA Special Interest Session, "Writing Centers: The View from the Administration." David Schwalm and Jeanne Simpson presented papers; Al DeCiccio served as respondent. The 1994 Distinguished Scholarship Awards were given to Joan Mullin and Ray Wallace for their book *Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center*, and to Christina Murphy for her article "The Writing Center and Social Constructionist Theory."

On Saturday, March 25, NWCA held its Executive Board Meeting. Here are some of the highlights of that meeting:

- Elections for 2nd Vice President. Joan Mullin was introduced as the new 2nd VP of NWCA.
- 1995 NCTE Workshop. Christina Murphy will chair a full-day workshop at the 1995 NCTE in San Diego focusing on tutoring paradigms and practices with a special emphasis on high school writing centers.
- By-law revisions. Al DeCiccio led a discussion of a draft of the new NWCA by-laws. Several amendments were added to the original draft. A final version will be ready for adoption at the next board meeting to be held at the National Writing Centers Association Conference in St. Louis.
- 2nd (Inter)national Writing Centers Conference. The Second (Inter)national Writing Centers Conference will be held in St. Louis, MO, September 28-30, 1995. Eric Hobson reported that over 200 writing center professionals have already been invited to participate. He expects a registration of upward to 400 people. The conference has reserved the National Bowling Hall of Fame for a Thursday night reception featuring the best blues band in St. Louis. Participants will also be able to get block seating for a St. Louis Cardinals baseball game.
- Distinguished Graduate Student Scholarship Award. Two students were chosen to receive the Distinguished Graduate Student Scholarship Award this year: Neal Lerner from Boston University and Deborah D'Agati from the University of Vermont. Both will receive a $200 grant.
- *Writing Center Journal.* Dave Healy, editor, reported that *WCJ* now has nearly 650 subscribers. He has also added a readers' response section to the journal.
- *Writing Lab Newsletter.* Mickey Harris, editor, reported that a *WLN* index is now available.
- Nominations for NWCA Executive Board. Alan Jackson is now soliciting nominations for the NWCA Executive Board. If you'd like to nominate someone, or nominate yourself, please contact Alan at 404-551-3207.
- NWCA Press. The executive board gave permission for the publication of an anthology of writing center articles to be ready for the national conference in St. Louis. This anthology, based in part on essays presented at the first national conference in New Orleans, is intended to be the first publication by NWCA Press. Future publications will depend on the success of this effort.
- Proposals for a 3rd NWCA conference. Joan Mullin is soliciting proposals for a possible 3rd NWCA Conference. These proposals will be discussed and voted on in St. Louis.

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Computers and Writing Conference

Call for Proposals
May 30-June 2, 1996
Logan, Utah
"Technology and Change"

Proposals are invited that pertain in some way to the uses of computers at any level of writing education: k-12 and all types of post-secondary educational institutions. Proposals must be postmarked by October 1, 1995. Send e-mail proposals to: computerwritingconference@writectr.usu.edu Send print proposals to: Christine Hult, CWC96 Program Chair, Department of English, Utah State University, Logan, UT 84322-3200.

Our readers respond. . . .

A) To Alexandra Maeck

This week at our tutors' meeting we pondered the various dilemmas Alexandra Maeck presented in the March, 1995 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter.* I commend her honesty in openly discussing problems faced by many centers, particularly her fear that if her site doesn't look busy, her funds and position may be in jeopardy. None of her problems have easy fixes, but we would like to pass along our suggestions.

Several peer tutors suggested changes along organizational lines:

1. Although many students are reluctant to sign up for specific times because they are commuter students, make it as obvious as possible that this is the best way to be assured of a half-hour devoted totally to you. Have an appointment book out in a public spot so that students can see what times are open. When drop-in students arrive, give each a full half-hour, first come first served, as long as no scheduled appointments have been made for the time slot. This will prevent tutors and their clients (even drop-ins) from feeling pressured by those waiting around them and will encourage drop-ins to sign up next time. Also tutors could walk with their clients to the appointment book after a session to encourage them to sign up for subsequent sessions. We were also unclear about Alexandra Maeck's comment that some students received credit for visiting the writing center—surely these students could be required to sign up ahead.

2. Consider changing the arrangement of tables from rows to groups—one area for working on your own, a couple of areas for tutors and clients, and an area for group work. This might cut down on the distracting elements and give the site a more organized appearance.

Here are suggestions for arranging for group meetings:

3. Consider taking one hour of each tutor's pay and allocating it to a meeting—the center is closed during this hour and all tutors must be there. Use this time for training, intellectual discussion, fun occasionally, as well as discussion of the tutoring challenges met that week.

4. Invite various faculty (and administrators) to the meetings as guest speakers. This does wonders for sparking interest in your writing center. Just ask them to discuss assignments they give or tell how tutors could help their students achieve their expectations. A lively discussion will follow. An off-shoot of this will be that some faculty will improve their assignments, the way they are introduced to classes, or the evaluation given.

5. If getting all the tutors together is impossible, consider setting up e-mail exchange, some sort of electronic bulletin board, or even just a running discussion on a word processor to which all tutors are required to respond. Everyone must make two responses per week, for example. As moderator, you can send out material to read, pose questions, etc. Check with Ed Nagelhout or Stuart Blythe from Purdue University who spoke on this topic at East Central Writing Centers Association in March. Even if your tutors have access to the electronic means only while in the Center, they can keep up with the discussion.

Final suggestions are related to Maeck's sense of inadequately meeting the needs of Los Angeles City College students:

6. Write a mission statement for the writing center and circulate it among departments and administrators. We feel she has too many expectations for her site and should limit her field of responsibility. The writing center cannot be responsible for a student's total academic experience, even though much of that experience involves writing. So perhaps a mission statement would help eliminate some problems.

Joyce Hicks and tutors: Mike McConnell, Al Pionke, Pam Seeber, Jeff Dinkelman, and Sarah Scherschligt.
Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, Indiana

B) To Alexandra Maeck

This is a response to Alexandra Maeck's "Report from a Correctional Institution: I Need Help," in the March 1995 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* (Vol. 19, No. 7). Here at the Delaware County Community College Writing Center we have a few techniques that seem to promote our purpose. Maybe they could benefit the center at Los Angeles City College as well.

One of our aims at the Center is to make ourselves more visible. To enhance exposure, at the beginning of each semester we drop memos into teachers' mailboxes inviting them to schedule an in-class visit by one of the two Writing Center staff. On a tear-off sheet, the teachers indicate a convenient date and time for one of us to stop by their class-

room. The Writing Center then organizes a master schedule and confirms the exact time for each visit.

The actual presentations are brief and direct. First we distribute flyers and Writing Center bookmarks relating the basic Who?, What?, Where? and When? information. Then we explain the kind of help a student can expect from the Center. Special emphasis is placed on writing across the curriculum; we want the students to know that the Center is available for writing help in *any* subject and not just for Comp I and II. Resumes, college transfer essays, and business letters and reports are not off limits for the Writing Center. We also stress the efficacy and convenience of using the computers in the DCCC General Computing Lab.

Our 15-minute class appearances show that the Writing Center is a comfortable place with real human beings working in it. And the visits are effective; we always see a surge in the number of appointments after we stop in the classrooms.

Another procedure we use about two weeks into each semester is to set up a Writing Center table outside the College cafeteria area. Here we "display our wares" so to speak. We gather some of our most popular generic handouts and offer these to students passing through on their way to lunch. The give-away information includes topics such as outlining, commonly confused words, eliminating fragments and run ons, taking classroom notes, writing thesis statements, and writing research papers. Of course, we also offer Writing Center bookmarks which indicate our location, hours and phone number. Lots of students (and faculty) take advantage of our "booth" information. And we find that once they've seen us and what we can provide, they are more included to climb the four flights of stairs for a personal visit to the Writing Center.

A Writing Center encouragement technique which a few instructors have used is grade incentive. Occasionally an exasperated teacher becomes desperate and offers a higher grade to those who schedule an appointment at the Writing Center. After our appointment with the student, we send a note to the teacher which explains what went on during the session. The note delineates what we think the student's weakness are and the improvements we and the student decided upon. Once the instructor sees the verification of the visit, he adjusts the grade on the paper. The adjustment is not a major one. If, for example, the student earned a "C+" on the paper, the instructor might raise it to a "B-." This procedure is usually just enough of an incentive to drive most of the class to the Center.

Linda Davis and Rebecca Harbison
Delaware County Community College
Media, PA

C) To Marion Lineham

(Editor's note: the May, 1994 issue of the Writing Lab Newsletter (vol. 18, no. 9) included Marion Linehan's "Don't Make Me Think!"—a description of something she sees at the end of the semester, those "desperate students who have never appeared before." She asked:

> *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. (14)*

When Alan Brender, at Temple University Japan, wrote to Marion Linehan offering some suggestions, she wrote back to thank him for his useful response. With their permission, we offer their letters to others looking for ways to stave off those end-of-the-semester first-timers who arrive in our labs too late to get any real help.)

Dear Ms. Linehan:

Your poignant description of last minute Annies and Andys and your plea for solutions to students underutilizing the writing center (rhetorical though it might have been) struck a cord with me. And even though my in-box is overflowing, I felt a compulsive need to respond.

Temple University Japan is a branch campus of Temple University (Philadelphia). We have about 900 students in our undergraduate program, 600 in the intensive language program, roughly 250 in the graduate programs, and almost 500 students in continuing education classes. Last term, we held over 1,200 tutorial sessions. And during last year we conducted more than 3,500 tutorials, primarily with undergraduate students. About 80% of the undergraduate students are Japanese.

Initially, we had great difficulty getting students to come to the writing center. We just could not get them through the door. So we developed strategies based on the premise that if Muhammad will not come to the mountain, then .... I asked all the composition and remedial writing teachers to give us presentation time. I then held training sessions with the peer tutors, and we made presentations in each class. Because Japanese students are very reticent to speak up in a class, I asked every student to write down one question about the writing center, about writing, or about a problem the student faced with writing. Then I or one of the tutors tried to answer the questions. After that, the class was broken into small groups, pairs or in some cases one-to-one tutoring situations—each headed by a peer tutor. I also offered to bring our traveling tutoring show to other classes if the instructors wanted us. We tried to work with the instructors so that our activities dovetailed with those of the instructors as much as possible.

In addition to taking the writing center to the students, I also developed referral forms for teachers. One part of the referral form was retained in the student's file in the writing center and the other part was filled out and give to the student to return to his/her instructor. We encouraged instructors to check on their students. Some teachers refer their entire classes. The art history professors, for

(cont. on page 14)

Tutors' Column

I became an English major for two reasons: one, because I have a genuine love for writing, and two, to stay as far away from computers as possible. So, when one of my professors approached me to see if I would be interested in working in the university writing center, I was skeptical. I had been to the writing center once, and I knew for a fact that they had a *whole room* full of computers there. She tried to reassure me, promising that my primary job would be assisting students with their papers, and that I would need to acquire only a basic understanding of Wordperfect.

You heard it here first: professors lie.

It seemed that I did nothing my first few weeks except field computer questions, and Wordperfect was the least of my concerns. Works, Windows, Kermit, Lotus—you name it, and there was a distraught student needing help with it. At first I attempted to solve these problems using the trial and error method, by which I mean I would try something and the computer would say "error." Eventually, the document in question would be in such disarray that the student would be forced to reboot and start over. "I'm an English major," I would mumble, my head hung low, and the student would give me that sympathetic, "you'll never have gainful employment as long as you live" look, and politely ask me to go away.

Still, I was confident in my ability to tutor, and thought maybe that would be enough to make up for my utter ineptness with the computers. A typical encounter with a student would go something like this:

Student: I've got a problem.

Me: You mean you *have* a problem.

Student: Whatever. Look, I did this file on my Mac, and I need to translate it to Wordperfect, change it to double spacing, give it headers, run it through Grammatik, do some graphs to go with it, save it as a generic text, upload it to my e-mail account, and send it to Hong Kong. Oh, and I've only got five minutes.

Me: You mean you only *have* five minutes.

Student: Whatever. Can you help me or not?

Me: I'm an English major.

Student: Never mind, then.

After about a hundred or so of these encounters, I begin to realize that working in a writing center is simply not an either/or proposition. It requires a blend of very different types of skills—on the one hand, the left-brain "your paper just doesn't touch my inner soul" type of stuff, and on the other, the right-brain "megabytes are my life" approach. Naturally, one will come easier than the other for most, but if we are to keep up in our increasingly technical society, it is a commitment we will have to make.

Contrary to popular belief, most of us English types plan on having jobs some day, and the experience we are gaining in the writing center could prove to be invaluable—if, that is, we take full advantage of the opportunities afforded to us. After a year of working in the writing center I have learned more about computers than I ever thought possible, in spite of the fact that I despise all things technical. As I now begin the dreaded senior year job search, I do so with the confidence that while I am by no means a computer expert, I have gained computer experience in the writing center which will at least serve as a technical foundation in whatever career I choose to pursue.

Assisting students with the writing process will, of course, always be a peer tutor's primary objective. I would simply like to suggest that if we are not actively working to become more computer literate, we are not only cheating the students who seek our help, but we are cheating ourselves as well.

Steve Stevenson, Peer Tutor
Texas Christian University
Ft. Worth, TX

Job Announcement: High School Writing Center Director

Baylor School, a college preparatory school in Chattanooga, TN, is seeking a writing center director for a position to begin in the Fall of 1995. The director would be responsible for maintaining and expanding the current center, a two-year-old department whose operations include daily assistance for students with writing difficulties, some remediation, and a fledgling writing-across-the-curriculum program. To apply, please mail a cover letter and resume to Baylor School, c/o Patrick Miller, Williams Island Ferry Road, Chattanooga, TN 37405 or fax to 615-265-4276. For more details, please call Patrick Miller at 615-267-8505 or 615-266-5591, or e-mail to rhetoric99@aol.com. For more information about the school, please check our entry in *Peterson's Guide to Private Secondary Schools.*

Tutoring and the writer's "felt sense": Developing and safeguarding the mind's ear

One of my colleagues wondered recently how any serious writer hoping someday to crack the New York markets could bear to work in a writing center and read student essays all day long. At first I assumed he was referring to the amount of time tutors spend on other people's writing while neglecting their own. Then he added, "Isn't what they say about computers true of writers as well: garbage in, garbage out?"

Classifying any of our students' work as garbage struck me as slightly offensive. And as a serious writer, intending someday soon to crack the New York markets, I took the rest of my colleague's insinuations to heart. What bothered me most, though, was the idea that bad writing might spread like a contagion—a sort of intellectually transmitted disease. Coming into daily contact, as we do, with illogical sentence structures, fuzzy thinking, clichés, mixed metaphors, and vague generalities must have some effect on the style of even the most firmly grounded writer among us. One can easily imagine the consequences of such contact on a writer whose style is in transition (as most styles are). On the other hand, whether the consequences are positive or negative probably depends on the tutor. After giving the matter some thought, I submit that the stronger a tutor's "felt sense," what Sondra Perl defines as the perception of "what is not yet in words but out of which images, words, and concepts emerge" (46-7), the less vulnerable his or her style will be to the negative effects of what my colleague characterized as "garbage in, garbage out." Indeed, for the tutor with a well-developed felt sense, daily contact with faulty logic or style can tune the mind's ear, similar to a musician's real one, allowing him or her to actually "hear" when a piece of writing rings true or screeches off key. It follows, then, that writing centers would do well to find ways to develop this mind's ear in their tutors. They might even go so far as to seek out and hire writers who show signs of already possessing the faculty. Such tutors could prove valuable to a writing center, able to serve students in ways that go far beyond the role of proofreader.

To make my case, I believe I must show that the mind's ear exists, that as an ingredient of Perl's felt sense it plays a central role in the mastery of language and writing, and that it can be developed or enhanced in students and tutors. In doing so, I'll delve cautiously into psycholinguistics because, through inquiries into what they term "inner speech," psycholinguists appear to have gained some insight into what the felt sense is, how it works, and where it comes from. They explore the mechanisms of language and thought, contemplating what goes on at the "interface between the written and the oral" (Goody ix), and this interface strikes me as a good description of where tutors stand in the writing center.

Of course, writing center practitioners do not need psycholinguists to alert them to the intimate connection between talking and writing. Recently, Wendy Bishop wrote an entire article on the role of talk in the writing center. As she says,

> Talk is central to what we do as writers and as humans. It is the collaborative activity that underlies most, if not all, individual acts of composing. Because of this, the work tutors do every day—talking about writing with writers—is valuable in uncountable ways. ("Writing" 30)

The value of talk begins with the clarification of meaning that results from reading a paper aloud. As Bishop says, and as we know from daily experience, reading aloud "can help writers revise and edit their work" (*Released* 57). As I hope to show, however, reading aloud, discussing, and getting a taste of a student's writing does much more. It strengthens the mind's ear, and therefore the felt sense, of both student and tutor. And if the psycholinguists are right, such talk gives writers access to the place in their minds where sound, syntax, and concept combine to create language and meaning.

Most of us readily accept such common visual metaphors for thought as the *mind's eye* and *insight* (in fact, I've already used *insight* in this essay). Ann Berthoff goes further, claiming that "visualizing, making meaning by means of mental images, is the paradigm of all acts of the mind . . . the emblem of the mind's power" and that "If we trust 'the intelligent eye,' we can teach our students to find in perception an ever-present model of the composing process" (194). Without underestimating the value of visualization, I would argue that when it comes to translating visual images into words, the mind's ear plays at least as great a role as the mind's eye.

To demonstrate this, however, I must establish the existence of the mind's ear. Does such a faculty exist? If so, how can we know if we possess it? One way to answer these questions is to conduct the following brief experiment: Without moving your lips or making a sound, can you hear in your mind the melody of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" (tapped out a note at a time on a piano)? If so, try to hear the opening movement of a more complex piece involving instruments in harmony, such as Beethoven's *Fifth*. Finally, if I mention the 23rd Psalm, can you hear the words in your

mind? Those who hear all three likely possess a well-developed mind's ear.

Psycholinguists not only confirm the existence of this faculty, which they call the *auditory imagination*, but agree that it plays a key role in language production and comprehension. The auditory imagination allows us to listen to inner speech; in fact, Don Ihde says that "*a central form of auditory imagination is thinking as and in a language*" (120, emphasis in original), and he links this ability to hear our thoughts not only to higher-order abilities in language and music, but to basic language use and learning. Sound, and therefore the mind's ear, is vital to these processes because, as he says,

> *Language-as-word is . . . embodied in sound and voice.* If the center of language is language-as-word, that center shows itself . . . "first" and dominantly in the auditory dimension. Its significance is a *meaning-in-sound.* (152, emphasis in original)

We know the significance of meaning-in-sound intuitively because as children nearly all of us (barring early deafness) became fluent in a spoken language long before we learned to read or write visual symbols. As Jack Goody points out, what is true of individual humans is also true of their societies, which have generally begun as oral cultures and only later, if at all, become literate. This order (sound first, sight second) is intrinsic, Goody says, "because even with the advent of script it is still in most respects a basically oral language that one is engaged in writing" (260).

The orality of text is, of course, most apparent when a child first learns to read and write. During the past year, my six-year-old, Evan, has experienced the magical yet frustrating process of matching sounds to letters, syllables, and words. We've read to him from an early age, and he loves to talk, so I suppose it makes sense that he's a phonetic reader, writer, and speller. In learning to read, he had the hardest time deciphering such words as "though" and "enough" or "should" and "could," whose sounds do not obviously match their spelling. When we corrected him, he often grew indignant, clinging to his own intuitive sounding out of the word. Recently, though, he seems to have made the proper sound-sight connections ("gh" to the "f" sound in "enough," for instance), perhaps because he had long used such words in speech and finally, in his mind, linked oral to written.

Evan still reads and writes aloud (spelling phonetically what he composes). I mention his experience because I assume that, like most people, he will eventually internalize much of the reading and composing process. His move toward inner speech, however, will not necessarily imply a divorce of sound and language, for as Ihde says, "what is usually taken as inner silence is in fact 'filled with words' " (120). As he develops, Evan will merely make greater use of his mind's ear, in conjunction with his physical ones, to sound out and choose from among these words to make meaning. Meanwhile, Goody says, even as someone like Evan comes to rely on inner speech, "Clearly the relationship between the spoken and the written word or sentence, between utterance and text, continues to be close" (186).

In *Languages of the Mind*, Ray Jackendoff shows us just how intimate this relationship is. In producing and comprehending language, he says, the mind uses three forms of information: "*phonology*, or sound structure, *syntax*, or phrase structure, and *conceptual structure*, or meaning" (4). These structures are intricately interdependent, with sounds forming the building blocks of syntax and phrases forming the building blocks of concepts. In translating a spoken sentence, the brain begins with phonological data, matches the sounds to what it knows about syntax, and builds a conceptual structure to derive meaning. When we speak, Jackendoff says, our brain translates an "initial thought, in the form of a conceptual structure, through the intermediate levels of syntactic and phonological structure into information in the form of motor instructions to the vocal tract" (9). Even when we are merely thinking or reading, our brain continues to translate our thoughts into sound. As Jackendoff asserts, "It is a curious but undeniable fact that linguistic images have not only meaning but also syntactic and phonological structure, down to stress, rhythm, and possibly even intonation" (11). This ability to manipulate sound and syntax in our minds, he says, is what gives us a "relatively overt realization of conceptual structure—language—that is unavailable to other organisms" (32).

In plainer words, our ability to "hear" with the mind's ear makes language possible. Judging from its link to the place "out of which images, words, and concepts emerge," the mind's ear is an essential element—perhaps *the* essential element—of Perl's felt sense. Perl herself acknowledges that *felt sense* is "another term for what professional writers call their 'inner voice' " (47), but she also notes its physical aspect. The felt sense, she says, "calls forth images, words, ideas, and vague, fuzzy feelings that are anchored in the writer's body. What is elicited, then, is not solely the product of a mind but of a mind alive in a living, sensing body" (45). Often experienced as a gut reaction, the felt sense draws on all our emotions and senses. To write, though, we must translate ideas, images, and fuzzy feelings into words, and as the psycholinguists have shown us, we make these translations via the mind's ear.

Consciously or not, most tutors already rely on the mind's ear. We use it diagnostically to detect poor diction, awkward or illogical sentences, inconsistencies in tone, or whatever simply sounds wrong in student writers' papers. I sometimes joke with my composition classes that bad writing (especially my own) causes me physical pain. And it's true that as I read an essay or story, any element that clashes with the piece's voice, tone, or theme, will—like the singing of an off-key soprano—make me

wince. On the other hand, my felt sense (working through the mind's ear) tells me when all the elements of a piece blend harmoniously (or simply sound right). This experience brings a pleasurable thrill that resembles the feeling I get when I enjoy a piece of music.

Obviously, a tutor with a well-tuned mind's ear can be invaluable in helping students revise their writing. When we focus on dissonant passages in a student's essay, we are not simply picking on trivial stylistic errors, though. As Jackendoff suggests, when a turn of phrase has a discordant ring, this may indicate problems with syntax, which in turn may indicate deeper conceptual problems. For example, consider the following passage from the opening paragraph of a student essay:

> The administration has strived to make students here more informed of the world around them. Because of the liberal arts background of the university, the administration chose to emphasize the importance of other cultures of the world. The resulting term is called multiculturalism. Although this term has been established as an objective of the university, it has been overused.

A sensitive mind's ear begins to experience discomfort when the university tries to "make the students more informed of the world around them." This feeling intensifies when the *term* "multiculturalism" becomes the "objective of the university." The illogic embedded in the diction and syntax errors—though imperceptible to student writers—creates confusion and casts meaning into doubt. Because the illogic starts in the thesis statement, it carries through the entire piece, warping even the overall structure. By detecting such a problem, pointing it out, and helping the student work through it, a tutor uses his or her mind's ear to clarify meaning, and therefore improve the essay.

More importantly, if only as a byproduct, the tutor also helps to improve the writer. Wallace Stegner says, "Writers teach other writers how to see or hear" (26), and this is literally what we do when we direct student writers' attention to inharmonious words, phrases, and concepts. We teach them to look at and listen more closely to what they say and how they say it—in effect, how to sound out meaning. Experienced writers practice this sounding out as a regular part of the composing process. For example, I usually test the integrity of a passage (or a whole piece) by reading it numerous times, sometimes aloud, and focusing on how it sounds. If my mind's ear detects words and phrases that sound somehow wrong, I'll begin a search for words that, in sounding right, better express my ideas. As Perl says,

> We intend to write something, words come, and now we assess if those words adequately capture our intended meaning. Thus, the first question we ask ourselves is "Are these words right for me?" "Do they capture what I'm trying to say?" "If not, what's missing?" Once we ask "what's missing?" we need once again to wait, to let a felt sense of what is missing form, and then to write out of that sense. (48)

By demonstrating this process, and inviting students to practice it, we help them (over time, and with varying degrees of success) to cultivate and fine-tune their mind's ear. We do so even if we've never heard of the auditory imagination. Considering the potential benefits, however, perhaps we should deliberately set about refining this faculty in ourselves and in our student writers.

"The range of variability of 'inner experience' is as wide and as susceptible to learning as that of 'outer experience,' " Ihde says (122). The question for tutors, then, is not whether students can learn to enhance their auditory imaginations (and so improve their writing), but how best to go about teaching them. Obviously, one way to access the "inner experience" is to start with the outer and have our students read their works aloud. Reading aloud is invaluable because it forms an interface between oral and written. It employs both inner and outer speech, both the mind's ear and the body's. It takes reader and listener directly into the realm of sound and syntax, where ideas are assembled (and reassembled). Depending on the writer and the quality of the writing, reading aloud can teach students to taste language, to savor the feeling of having chosen the right words to express an idea or a mood.

In relation to tutoring, though, perhaps the chief merit of reading aloud is how it invokes "voice," both literal and literary. I've read a lot in the past year on WCenter questioning the existence of this intangible quality. The authors of such entries discount the Romantic notion that, inherently, each writer has a voice unique to him or her—a literary fingerprint that, carefully examined, would allow the reader to identify the author's work from a line-up of texts. As Ed Lotto says,

> Authentic voice is a myth if it is meant to be the expression of a 'unique' individual. At some stage, all voice is learned from others through imitation. People tend to get attached to certain voices because of the social context in which they are learned, but almost everybody can speak in a variety of voices. (WCenter message, 20 May 1994)

Certainly writers speak in a variety of voices, adopting a new voice to fit the specific purpose of each piece of writing. And certainly we learn voice from others. I disagree, however, with the voice-as-myth thesis. Like Ihde, I believe instead that "Voice is the spirit of language" (121). Ihde asserts that inner speech "retains the same sense of 'mineness' of voiced speech" (121) and that the auditory imagination "is a matter of 'voice' in some sense" (120).

Good writing, too, is in some sense a matter of voice. Accomplished writers use tense shifts, idiom, and variations of tone and diction to create human-sounding narrative voices (for instance, the voices of Twain's Huck Finn and Salinger's Holden Caulfield). Reading

such prose means not only visualizing scenes or understanding concepts, but hearing a persona or narrator speak. Gérard Genette says, "Whether it is a narrative or not, when I open a book, it is because I want the author to talk to me" (quoted in Coste 164). Like Genette, when I tutor, I often seek for a voice to help me relate to and fathom an obscure paper. A consistent, authentic voice unifies a piece of writing at all levels of sound, syntax, and concept, brings it to life, engages (through the mind's ear) the reader's emotions and intellect, and enhances the author's credibility. The opposite is often true of a false, inconsistent, or missing voice.

In view of this, a tutor whose mind's ear is especially sensitive to voice could be of great help to student writers. Rather than work piecemeal on grammar, thesis, logic, or structure, such a tutor could do for the tutoring session what voice does for the piece of writing. By focusing on voice, the tutor takes a unified approach to sound, syntax, and concept, helping the student understand that these elements are interdependent, the quality of each adding to or detracting from the success of the piece. To illustrate, I offer an e-mail message posted by Steve, a peer tutor at our writing center. In reporting on a tutoring session, he shows his ability to "hear" when a student's voice changes, spoiling the comic effect she was after. Steve writes,

> She really did have some good humor, but the voice was inconsistent. It was like she'd be rolling along in this funny, conversational tone and then go "wait a minute! This is sophomore comp!" and it would turn dry and then it would get funny again. (Stevenson, e-mail post on the TCU network)

Together, they worked to make the voice of the piece more consistent, weeding out the "dry" parts. Among other things, he advised her "not to be afraid to let her hair down a little." Steve is one of the best young writers I've come across in eight years of teaching, and his ability to explain voice makes him an especially effective tutor. As it happens, he has won several short story contests at our university, and there's probably a link between his fiction writing and his sensitivity to voice.[1] Quite possibly, creative writers like Steve come to the writing center with something of an advantage. Having consciously experimented with and acquired a repertoire of voices, they can help students, through discussion and modeling, to acquire voices of their own.

Language theorists lend some support to the idea that writers whose crafts evolved out of oral traditions have a special intimacy with sound and therefore voice. This is especially true of poets because, as Ihde says, "Even in written form poetry retains its adherence to the sensuousness of sound" (178). Modern fiction also has oral vestiges, written as it is "with both Hearer and Reader in mind" (Fleischman 120-21). I would contend, however, that all writers—scholarly or creative, student or tutor—immersed in an oral culture have the chance to fine-tune the mind's ear and eventually master the narrative voice.

By working together in writing centers, writers immerse themselves in such a culture. In fact, Suzanne Fleischman's description of an oral culture as "in general empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced" (121) gives one a fair linguistic image of the collaborative environment of most writing centers. Meanwhile, she says, "oral modes of expression . . . focus on contextualized participant interaction" (121), echoing Stephen M. North's views on the value of conversations between tutor and student writer. As North says, "Nearly everyone who writes likes—and needs—to talk about his or her writing, preferably to someone who will really listen, who knows how to listen, and knows how to talk about writing too" (440).

Tutors whose minds' ears are attuned to the nuances of sound and voice know how to listen, and how to talk about writing. They spend their days at the interface of the oral and the written, using their felt sense to help other writers make and clarify meaning. In the process, despite my colleagues' fears, they do not become the unsuspecting victims of an intellectually transmitted disease. Instead, they become more adept at making and clarifying their own meaning—skills that, someday soon, just might help them crack the New York market.

Steve Sherwood
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, TX

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[1] Editor's note: For a sample of Steve's excellent writing, see his essay in this month's Tutors' Column.

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A reader responds (cont. from p.8)

example, require their students to obtain a signature from a tutor that the paper has been discussed.

We also held an open house to encourage students to come to the writing center. A visit to the writing center was added to the orientation for new students. We did little things, too, like always having the door open, having the sign-up sheet out in the hallway where students didn't feel threatened when signing up, and training tutors to cease private conversations when students (clients) enter the writing center. We held workshops at least four times per term. Announcements were posted around the school, placed in the student and faculty newsletters and in every teacher's mailbox. We started a regular column in the student newspaper called "From the Writing Center" written by a peer tutor. When students were pleased with the results of the tutorials, we encouraged them to proselytize for us. In other words we tried to sell ourselves as hard as we could. And it paid off. Last term, for example, I heard a great hubbub outside the writing center and went out into the hallway to discover the source of the commotion. About 40 students had gathered there—some standing, some sitting on the floor and others propped against the walls. They were all waiting for the sign-up sheet to be put up for the following week. We had become so popular that within hours of putting up the sign up sheet, all tutorial slots for the following week were filled. And, consequently, the writing center took on a certain prestige it never had before. The student government made the availability of tutorials in the writing center a priority in the election campaign. As a result of the campaign rhetoric, hours were extended, the budget increased and more students were helped.

So you see, it is possible to do something.

Sincerely,
Alan Brender
Temple University Japan
Tokyo, Japan

D) Marion Linehan responds

Dear Alan,

Thank you so much for your words of encouragement. Your letter has given me great encouragement for the future of our Writing Center. I particularly liked your analogy of Muhammad going to the mountain. As a result, we now have moved to a more central location, added eight computers, and increased our hours, and for the last two months the number of students coming to us has increased. In addition, more students are coming from disciplines other than English, but so far they can hardly claim equal representation. We do have a few instructors who bring their classes for orientation here. However, since I have only one part-timer to help staff the Center from 7:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., we don't have personnel available to approach the various classes. That will have to wait a bit. Nonetheless, at the moment, things are looking up because we have our first peer tutor this semester.

Your list of tactics sits in my top desk drawer and provides a blueprint of what to do, if not now, then as soon as a hint of opportunity raises its head. Thank you again for taking the time to offer such encouragement in my moments of despair.

Sincerely,
Marion Linehan
Tarrant County Junior College
Hurst, Texas

Materials from the Northern California WCA

June Gillam, Chair of the 1995 Conference of the Northern California Writing Centers Association, prepared a report on the conference, held in Feb., in Stockton, CA. Her report may interest other conference planners as it includes suggestions for future conferences based on the 1995 conference. Also available are videotapes (@$15 or $25 for both) of two of the breakout sessions, one on "Theory and Practice of Teaching Freshman Composition" and the other on "Facilitating Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Projects." To order, contact June Gillam, San Joaquin Delta College, 5151 Pacific Ave., Stockton, CA 95207; 209-474-5584; gillam@ms.sjdccd.cc.ca.us.

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

Sept. 28-30: National Writing Centers Association Conference, in St. Louis, MO
Contact: Eric Hobson, St. Louis College of Pharmacy, 4588 Parkview Pl., St. Louis, MO 63110 (314-367-8700, ext. 244).

October 21: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in Seattle, WA
Contact: Larry Nichols, Seattle University Writing Center, English Department, Seattle University, Broadway and Madison, Seattle, WA 98122-4460 (206-296-5309)

Feb. 1-3: Southeastern Writing Center Association and South Carolina Writing Center Association, in Myrtle Beach, SC
Contact: Phillip Gardner, Writing Center, Francis Marion University, Florence, SC 29501

Writing Center Ethics

The question of expertise

Reasons number three and four in the "Top Ten Reasons Why Writing Centers are Unethical" are, perhaps, less directly concerned with matters of ethical *morality* than some of the reasons I've addressed in past columns, but they are more specifically focused on the *legitimacy* of what we do, and for that reason, I consider them to be matters of ethical concern. To recapitulate:

> **Reason #4:** *Writing centers are unethical because the supposed "writing expertise" of tutors is a sham. Although tutors may have written a few decent papers themselves, the help they provide to other students is often no better than the kind of misguided "advice" we often see on critique sheets when we use peer review in our own classes.*

> ***Reason #3**: Writing centers are unethical because they have little or no claim to the "disciplinary expertise" necessary to comment on writing in many upper and lower division classes. Writing people say that "form is inseparable from content." Well, if that's so, and if you don't know the content, then how can you say anything meaningful about the form?*

In response to reason number four—the less substantive of the two critiques—I can see taking one of two possible stances, depending on whether I wanted to adopt a defensive or an aggressive posture. If I felt inclined to be restrained and defensive about my tutors' relative levels of expertise, I would talk about the degree to which they have actively demonstrated their ability to tutor writing, a demonstration which relies on a good deal more than "writing a few decent papers themselves." For me, and for virtually every other writing center in the country, the ability to write a good paper is the first hurdle to becoming a tutor, not the last. Requirements vary from institution to institution, of course, but typically tutors must be recommended by faculty members who have had the chance to observe and assess their writing abilities, they must be trained extensively—often by taking a required course in tutoring methodologies or the process of writing instruction, and even then, employment as a tutor in the writing center is not guaranteed. One of the interesting ironies about writing centers is that even though tutoring positions tend to be rather low status and low paying jobs, competition for those positions is often fierce. Why? Because students realize something that academic officials have yet to figure out: working in a writing center looks great on a resume.

My aggressive response to reason number four would be this: Have you ever taken a good look at the commentaries that *instructors* write on student papers? Talk about misguided advice! I have seen petty and small-minded instructor comments on student papers. I have seen instructor comments that gave students sometimes contradictory, sometimes useless, sometimes inappropriate, and sometimes incoherent advice. I have seen instructor comments that failed to address even the most basic rhetorical issues of argument, development, and organization in a paper, and lapsed, ritualistically, into an effusion of scorn about a student's inability to recognize a single comma splice.

Excuse me? Who is asking whom about expertise? What we're talking about here, more often than not, is a difference of opinion about the *kinds* of commentary that are given at particular stages of the writing process. In essence, the instructor is saying, "That's not what I would have told the student." And if that's the case, he/she is probably right. But so what? We make no claim to be mind readers, and we make no claim to absolute perfection in our ability to tutor student writers. Who can? Who would try? The point is this: writing center tutors are capable and competent and trained to do what they do. And they do it well.

Let me turn now to reason number three, which takes a point of view similar to the one discussed above, but which offers a more pointed assault on the ethics of writing center work. How do we in writing centers handle the issue of disciplinarity in student writing? The advent of the social-constructionist paradigm and its foundational belief in the deeply situated nature of discourse has raised many troublesome questions for writing centers. Christina Murphy's recent article on the impact social-constructionism has had on writing centers spells out many of these concerns, concerns that are becoming even more poignant given the increasing number of writing across the curriculum programs that are being (and have been) established across the country. If we accept the fact that different disciplines embody their own sets of discourse practices—that writing in these disciplines means demonstrating "membership" in a highly specialized community through the successful manipulation of rhetorical conventions, acceptable topics for discourse, shared knowledge, specialized vocabulary, and approved modes of inquiry—then how are writing centers supposed to cope? Writing center tutors can never claim expertise in all the disciplines they are likely to encounter in student papers, so how can they possibly provide mean-

ingful or useful assistance to writers enmeshed in the tropes of an unfamiliar discipline?

If you'll forgive me for citing myself, I have tried to answer many of these questions in a recent *Writing Center Journal* article, "Rethinking the WAC/ Writing Center Connection" which argues: (1) Most WAC courses fail to give students the type of assignments that encourage immersion in disciplinary discourse. More often, the assignments from these courses allow students to fall back on generic rhetorical modes such as summary, comparison/contrast, description, narration, etc. that can easily be addressed in the writing center; (2) Students just entering a new discourse community—and this includes most undergraduates—are unfamiliar enough with the features of the discourse that they are not likely to incorporate many of those features into their papers. Instructors, knowing their students will generally be unable to speak as full-fledged members of the discourse community, will not evaluate students based on this ability, and this relieves writing center tutors of the need to focus on disciplinary conventions in conferences (this is not *always* the case, however); (3) The tutors' lack of disciplinary knowledge can, in some ways, be seen as an advantage in student conferences. On the one hand, students are able to equalize the uneven power relationship in conferences with a tutor because they are now able to claim some expertise over the subject matter that the tutor does not have, and on the other hand, tutors—by virtue of their unfamiliarity with the discipline and its discourse conventions—can ask questions and offer insights that the student writer might not otherwise have thought of. In this way, then, the center can offer significant *environmental* and *cognitive* benefits, despite the limitations it may have in disciplinary knowledge.

Well, that's it for this school year. When I return in the fall, I'll finish up the last two "Top Ten" reasons and continue with a whole new set of ethical conundra for your reading pleasure. Have a great summer!

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