THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

...FROM THE EDITOR...

Thanks to all the members of our newsletter group who spoke up and offered compelling reasons why the newsletter should move to a slightly larger type size than had been used in previous issues. If this is to continue to be our newsletter, reflecting the interests and voices of this group, then its appearance ought to be a matter of group consensus too. So, given the almost unanimous vote over the last few months, I've switched type size. Let me know how you like the newsletter's readability now.

You'll also notice in this month's issue another response to readers' requests— two useful articles on working with learning disabled students. But if you have more to offer us on this important topic, let us hear from you.

And if you are chairing a conference, let us hear from you too. But don't wait until all details are settled to send in your announcements because some readers need to know far in advance in order to request travel funds. I can include preliminary notices to alert people and then, later on, more complete announcements.

• Muriel Harris, editor

Improving our abilities to tutor students with learning disabilities

With implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act a reality, I am sure our Writing Lab at Idaho State was not alone in wondering how the ADA would impact our operations. Would more students with disabilities, particularly learning disabilities, come to us? Would we be able to help them? Would we be able to train tutors to address the special needs of these students even though we had no specialized training ourselves? And with each affirmative response came the concomitant — HOW?

We have proceeded, during the past year, to define our role and our answers through a process of assessing our skills and strengths, identifying and using available resources, and developing strategies for improving our weaknesses. We have learned valuable lessons from each other and our clients.

Assessing skills and strengths

First, we believed compliance with ADA regulations would mean more of a difference in degree than in kinds of services we provide. After all, by our exist-

ence we already offered students important options: an alternative to the full classroom setting; focused one-on-one attention; patient, supportive responses; individualized content and pacing; a systematic approach to manageable learning tasks; and frequent, positive reinforcement.

These options seem tailor-made to address problems described by the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) as characteristic of students with learning disabilities (see chart on page 3).

We could readily see that many of these difficulties occur to varying degrees among our typical writing center users. Still, we had some surprises. We had not known that yawning, for example, could be a clue to "overload" or that hyperactivity and distractibility were likely to be part of the LD package.

Assessing our skills also led us to realize that our staff members already possess the most important qualifications for working successfully with students who have learning disabilities. Surely our tutors exhibit patience, good humor, flexibility, respect for students and their work, and the metacognitive ability to adapt their techniques to a student's learning style when appropriate. But although we have the kinds of attributes needed, we found we did not always have the degree of patience, flexibility, empathy or humor we wished for. When some students habitually used their tutoring time to vent frustration against "the system" and took inordinate (to us) amounts of time shuffling through to find papers and assignment sheets in a fluster of dropped books, notebooks and appointment slips, we sometimes found our own frustration levels rising. And we needed to learn what to do about this.

Finding and using resources

Certainly our most important resources have been people. Immediate colleagues within the Academic Skills Center, of which the Writing Lab is a part, have special expertise in reading, study skills, math, and English for Speakers of Other Languages. Under our Student Affairs umbrella, resources include the appointed Ombudsperson (one of the requirements of the ADA is that a person be designated to coordinate compliance on every campus) and Center for Services to Students with Disabilities, which arranges for (among other things) physical and academic accommodations. Members of a student support group for students with "Learning Diversity" operate a volunteer service to read textbooks and lecture notes on tape. We can also refer our clients to graduate students in the College of Education for reading as-

sistance and to the Speech Pathology program for screening and therapy.

By far our most significant resource person is now a member of our tutoring staff. Liz, who has a documented language processing learning disability, was one of the most successful students in my upper division composition class last spring. She had learned so much about her own disability and had developed such effective compensatory strategies that I knew she could help us help other students. Liz has given us, both formally in staff training sessions and informally through her own presence, much greater understanding of phenomena such as distractibility, difficulties with organizing materials, or with writing and listening at the same time (note taking), differences in processing from aural instead of print sources, the use of tactile materials to represent abstract concepts, and other techniques. Her handout, "It Works for Me," lists strategies that have proven helpful for us and our students (see Resource List for information on how to obtain a copy of this or other materials mentioned).

Material resources are available from several sources, we discovered by asking our colleagues. Two videos we have found useful are *F.A.T. City*, which focuses on common misconceptions that undermine teaching and learning for students with learning disabilities (produced by Eagle Hill Outreach of Greenwich, CT), and *I'm Not Stupid*, which features success stories from learners who have overcome disabilities (from the Learning Disability Association). Both are excellent for staff training; we find our lab users appreciate them also. A good book for helping students with spelling (a major problem for LD students) is the NCTE publication, *Beyond the SP Label*, by Patricia McAlexander, Ann Dobie, and Noel Gregg.

We also found ways to use felt shapes, tinker toys and molecular models to demonstrate abstract concepts in concrete, touchable and traceable form. Red circles as subjects can be "modified" by

transparent blue overlays representing adjectives; yellow square "verbs" can be similarly modified by orange "adverbs." Complete "sentences" can be constructed out of "head" spheres linked to "bodies"; take one element away and the "fragment" topples. Or colored pieces of felt in large and small bars and squares can depict paragraphs with main points and supporting details. Mixed colors are readily seen to need sorting and regrouping, whereas mixed ideas in written form in a draft are often hard to find in the gray confusion of print.

Improving our weaknesses

Some alterations in our modus operandi countered unforeseen difficulties. To alleviate what we felt as a heavy emotional and cognitive strain for tutors and tutored, we changed our scheduling for students with disabilities. We allow sixty minutes in the appointment book, but use only forty-five for work, thus building in time for the tutee not to feel pressured about getting in and out, and for the tutor to take a bit of a walk or a cup of coffee before the next appointment. We also schedule easily distracted and confused students in a separate small office, whenever possible. And we limit and clearly delineate our focus: the writing tutors concentrate on a specific writing assignment task, whereas Liz concentrates on general strategies and attitude issues.

What we still do not have, and very much need, is a campus office to provide diagnostic screening and testing for learning disabilities. For the most part, we provide services to students who have already been tested and whose disabilities are "documented." Nevertheless, we've become sensitive to the language processing problems we know students with learning disabilities encounter; when we see them we ask if they've considered diagnosis, or if, perhaps, they'd like to talk with Liz about the possibilities. If so, she describes the formal evaluation process and refers them for further information to the out-of-town professionals who conduct such testing. If Liz were not on our staff, we

would be referring students to other support service professionals.

Finally, we have come to realize that our initial attempts to prepare ourselves for ADA implementation are but the first steps in a long-term commitment, involving students, faculty, administrators, and staff. On our campus, and I suspect elsewhere, administrators were the first to be made aware of the ADA and its attendant requirements for compliance. Students, diagnosed ever earlier in their school careers, are likely to be apprised of their rights and responsibilities when they arrive. Faculty, however, may be the least informed and yet the most vulnerable to misunderstanding, resistance, and anxiety about the whole range of issues involved with disabilities of all kinds. We know that Writing Lab relations with faculty require regular and thoughtful communications, attention to the confidentiality of student records, and mutual respect. These practices become even more important when we are

Characteristics of students with learning disabilities

Reading Skills
- Slow reading rate
- Uneven comprehension and retention of material read
- Difficulty identifying important points, themes
- Incomplete mastery of phonics, confusion of similar words
- Omission of words or lines
- Difficulty reading for long periods of time

Written Language Skills
- Difficulty planning a topic, organizing thoughts on paper
- Sentence-level problems, run-ons, fragments, word endings
- Frequent spelling errors, especially omissions, substitutions, transpositions
- Difficulty in proofreading, making revisions
- Slow written production, often limited length
- Overly large or poorly formed handwriting, inconsistent spacing, capitalization
- Inability to copy correctly from a book or chalkboard

Oral Language Skills
- Inability to concentrate on, comprehend rapidly spoken language
- Difficulty in expressing concepts orally
- Difficulty speaking grammatically correct English
- Difficulty following or conversing about an unfamiliar idea
- Trouble telling a story in the proper sequence
- Difficulty following directions

Attention and Concentration
- Trouble focusing and sustaining attention on task
- Easily distracted by outside stimuli
- Difficulty juggling multiple demands
- Short-term memory problems
- Hyperactivity and excessive movements
- Overloads quickly, may yawn excessively
- Difficulty managing time

working with students with learning disabilities. Our campus ADA compliance ombudsperson provides documentation letters to faculty on behalf of students who are eligible for "accommodations." Our Writing Lab role has (so far) been primarily one of 1) explaining what strategies we are recommending, such as taping reading notes to allow a student who has difficulty processing written notes to access the information aurally, or developing a personal set of spelling flash cards, and 2) encouraging and facilitating conversations between students and their instructors about specific needs for specific assignments. We have become keenly aware, though, that campus-wide policies to address grading issues, degree requirements, special program requirements such as student teaching, or adequate placement and career counseling services need to be developed.

We have also become aware that the numbers of students with disabilities who enroll at our universities will continue to increase, as students with disabilities of all kinds, and especially learning disabilities, are diagnosed early in their school careers and encouraged to pursue higher education. Figures from the HEATH Resource Center of the American Council on Education show that from 1978 to 1991 full-time, first-time freshmen reporting a disability increased from one in thirty-eight to one in eleven. Of those, 14.8 % had reported a learning disability in 1985; that number increased to 24.9 % in 1991. On our campus, approximately one student in eleven reports some kind of disability.

Not only are we likely, then, to continue to see more students with disabilities, I believe we will continue to see more seriously-challenged and multiply-challenged students, in part because of rising numbers of children born in poverty, disease, and abusive environments. I believe our institutions can also expect challenges—through the courts—to degree requirements, professional program certification, to any number of institutional policies. Such challenges will undoubtedly continue to have an impact on the work we do in our writing centers and the way in which we prepare ourselves and our staffs to do that work.

Anne E. Mullin
Idaho State University
Pocatello, ID

Resources — A beginning list

AHEAD: Association of Higher Education and Disability, P.O. Box 21192, Columbus, OH 43221. (614) 488-4972.

Brinckerhoff, Loring C., Stan F. Shaw, and Joan M. McGuire. "Promoting Access, Accommodations, and Independence for College Students with Learning Disabilities." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 25 (Aug./Sept. 1992): 417-429.

Eagle Hill OUTREACH, 45 Glenville Road, Greenwich, CT 06830. (203) 622-9240. (Producer of *F.A.T. City Learning Disability Workshop* video.)

HEATH Resource Center of the American Council on Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 800, Box FD, Washington, D.C. 20036-1193. (800) 544-3284 or (101) 939-9320. (Clearinghouse for information, publications pertinent to the ADA and Sec. 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, among other issues relating to higher education.)

Learning Disability Association, 4156 Library Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15234. (412) 341-8077. (Excellent line of books, tapes, and other materials, incl. *I'm Not Stupid.*)

McAlexander, Patricia, Ann B. Dobie and Noel Gregg. *Beyond the "SP" Label.* Urbana: NCTE, 1992.

National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) 99 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016 (212) 687-7211. (Monographs, short articles on subjects, such as Dysgraphia).

The Orton Dyslexia Society 724 York Road, Baltimore, MD 21204 (301) 296-0232.

Scheid, Elizabeth. "It Works for Me." Handout. Idaho State U., Writing Lab, Campus Box 8010, Pocatello, ID 83209. (208) 236-3662. E-Mail Mullanne@CWIS.ISU.EDU.

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations (WCAs)

January 27: South Carolina Writing Center Association, in Greenville, SC Contact: Jeannie Dobson, The Writing Center, Greenville Technical College, Box 5616, Greenville, SC 29606 (803-250-8575)

March 4: New England Writing Centers Association, in Nashua, NH Contact: Kim Montine, Writing & Learning Center, Rivier College, 420 Main Street, Nashua, NH 03060-5086 (603-888-1311, ext. 8580)

March 10: CUNY Writing Centers Association, in Brooklyn, NY Contact: Lucille Nieporent, The Writing Center, Kingsborough Community College, 2001 Oriental Blvd., Brooklyn, NY 11235 (718-369-5405) or Kim Jackson, Harris 015, CCNY Writing Center, 138th and Convent, New York, NY 10031 (212-650-7348).

March 10-11: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Bloomington, IN Contact: Ray Smith, Campuswide Writing Program, Franklin Hall 008, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405 (812-855-4928; e-mail: joepeter@indiana.edu).

March 30-April 1: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Arkadelphia, AR Contact: Martha Dale Cooley, English Dept. and Writing Center, P.O. Box 7810, Henderson State University, Arkadelphia, AR 71999-0001 (501-230-5283; e-mail: cooley@holly.hsu.edu)

April 7: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Newark, DE Contact: Gilda Kelsey, University Writing Center, 015 Memorial Hall, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716 (302-831-1168; e-mail: kelsey@brahms.udel.edu).

LD college writers:
Selected readings

During the past decade, something has happened in our writing centers and writing classrooms. Tutors and teachers increasingly are encountering a special brand of inexperienced writers seeking help: the learning disabled. Not that LD students have not always occupied a certain number of seats in our rooms, but it seems that the post-secondary LD population is growing and, noticeably, it is more vocal, more insistent than before. As our number of LD college writers grows, so grow our own uncertainties about how to instruct them.

A significant part of our problem with LD writers is that such students are often not tested and diagnosed as learning disabled. Either the undesirable stigma of "LD" or the costs and time involved prohibit affected students from seeing help from special education sources. Yet these students know that they need help and accommodations in order to succeed in college—particularly in courses with a heavy emphasis on writing. Thus, they find their way (or more commonly their instructors guide them) to writing centers where tutors uninformed in LD theory and pedagogy do their best. As a writing center director responsible for keeping tutors informed and as a composition teacher who struggles to help her own LD writers, I have spent the last two years reading, researching, and evaluating LD research on writing since 1980 in the fields of special education and composition. My focus was strictly on discovering ways to work with (not diagnose or even identify) writers whose problems seemed to go beyond those already addressed in the writing center and classroom, on researching work about college writers (not just any writers), and on learning strategies effective with adults (not children) who exhibit learning problems. This article represents my results—and some unexpected findings.

Surprise #1: we are on our own

I knew from experience that LD writers cannot be classified—twenty students with learning disabilities will have difficulty writing and revising essays for twenty different reasons. Indeed, the same LD student will have difficulty writing different essays for different reasons; further, once a problem is solved in one part of an essay, the same problem-solving strategy may not work again for the same difficulty a few lines later. This is the knowledge all tutors and instructors gain from working with LD students. The surprise is that special educators have no special insights to help us. In special education, writing problems are classified into distinct areas such as handwriting, grammar, usage, and written expression. While the first three lend themselves to exhaustive analysis and quantitative study, the last does not. Thus, to date, few helpful studies exist. But written expression is just the area tutors and writing instructors teach.

Surprise #2: we are already doing "IT"

The recommendations special education offers will sound quite familiar: dividing tasks into the writing process, using dialogue journals, teaching problem-solving, having an instructor work as an interviewer/questioner about students' ideas, focusing on content and not solely on mechanics, evaluating writing portfolios, interacting with students about their drafts not just their final products, using peer evaluation groups. Of course, effective tutors and writing instructors are already using all or some of these strategies; our problems lie beyond these recommendations since LD students present special challenges.

Surprise #3: adults are children and children are adults

Much research focuses on elementary school children and preschoolers. While educators acknowledge that adults learn differently than, and have problems distinct from, children, adult LD writers are therefore much more difficult to study and to analyze.

Suggested reading list

Until a hybrid appears who has years of experience in both fields of special education and composition, we are already doing what we should when we devote time and energy to each particular student's needs at each particular moment in time, with patience and the understanding that those needs sometimes change and sometimes remain the same. The following works were most helpful from the perspective of writing center director/writing instructor.

1. General information on learning disabilities

These works cover learning strategies, curriculum concerns, mainstreaming, confidentiality, and accommodations.

Howe, Kenneth R. and Ofelia B. Miramontes. *The Ethics of Special Education.* New York: Teachers College P., 1992.

Kronick, Doreen. *New Approaches to Learning Disabilities: Cognitive, Metacognitive, and Holistic.* Philadelphia: Grune & Stratton, 1988. See especially Ch. 9, "Remediation, Compensation, Modifications, and Observation" (141-155); Ch. 10, "Lateral Model of Competency" (157-181); Ch. 11, "Learning Through Guided Questioning" (183-213); Ch. 13, "Promoting Lateral Thought Through Curriculum" (215-226); and Ch. 14, "A Superordinate Curriculum," (227-254).

Wong, Bernice Y.L. "On Cognitive Process-Based Instruction: An

Introduction." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 25.3 (1992): 150-152, 172.

2. General information on learning disabilities in higher education

These works address the concerns of the adult learner.

Barbaro, Fred. "The Learning Disabled College Student: Some Considerations in Setting Objectives." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 15.6 (1982): 344-346.

Dexter, Beverly L. "Helping Learning Disabled Students Prepare for College." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 15.6 (1982): 344-346.

Kahn, Michael S. "Learning Problems of the Secondary and Junior College Learning Disabled Student: Suggested Remedies." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 13.8 (1980): 40-44.

Ryan, Ann Grasso, and M. Kathleen Heikkila. "Learning Disabilities in Higher Education: Misconceptions." *Academic Therapy* 24.2 (1988): 177-192.

Shaw, Stan F., Loring C. Brinckerhoff, Judy K. Kistler, and Joan M. McGuire. "Preparing Students With Learning Disabilities for Postsecondary education: Issues and Future Needs." *Learning Disabilities* 2.1 (1991): 21-26.

3. Works illustrating and analyzing sample LD writing

Not all of these works satisfy every criterion; some use children as samples, and the main idea of others is to explain the writing process. I suggest reading them anyway as their strengths lie in cases studies, analysis, and suggestions for helping students.

Cicci, Regina. "Disorders of Written Language." *Progress in Learning Disabilities*. Ed. Helmer R. Myklebust. New York: Grune &

Stratton, 1983. 207-232.

Cruickshank, William M., William C. Morse, and Jeannie S. Johns. *Learning Disabilities: The Struggle from Adolescence toward Adulthood*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1980. See especially case studies "Raymond" and "Jim" on 245-255.

Englert, Carol Sue. "Unraveling the Mysteries of Writing Through Strategy Instruction." *Intervention Research in Learning Disabilities*. Eds. Thomas E. Scruggs and Bernice Y.L. Wong. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990.

—. "Writing Instruction From a Sociocultural Perspective: The Holistic, Dialogic, and Social Enterprise of Writing." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 25.3 (1992): 153-172.

Englert, Carol Sue, Taffy E. Raphael, Kathleen L. Fear, and Linda M. Anderson. "Students' Metacognitive Knowledge about How to Write Informational Texts." *Learning Disability Quarterly* 11.1 (1988): 18-46.

Graham, Steve, and Karen R. Harris. "Improving Composition Skills of Inefficient Learners with Self-Instructional Strategy Training." *Topics in Language Disorders* 7.4 (1987), 66-77.

Johnson, Doris J. "Disorders of Written Language." *Adults with Learning Disabilities: Clinical Studies*. Eds. Doris J. Johnson and Jane W. Blalock. Orlando: Grune & Stratton, 1987. 173-203.

Learning Disabilities: Research and Practice 6.4 (1991). This entire issue is devoted to writing, but see especially Charles A. MacArthur, Shirley S. Schwartz, and Steve Graham, "A Model for Writing Instruction: Integrating Word Processing and Strategy Instruction

into a Process Approach to Writing," 230-236.

Martin, Judy L. "Removing the Stumbling Blocks: 25 Ways to Help Our Learning Disabled College Writers." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 18.4 (1991), 283-289.

McAlexander, Patricia J., and Noel Gregg. "The Roles of English Teachers and LD Specialists in Identifying Learning Disabled Writers: Two Case Studies." *Journal of Basic Writing* 8.2 (1989): 72-86.

Moran, Mary Ross. "Individualized Objectives for Writing Instruction." *Topics in Language Disorders* 7.4 (1987): 42-54.

Moulton, Jacqueline R., and Mary Sterling Bader. "The Writing Process: A Powerful Approach for the Language-Disabled Student." *Annals of Dyslexia* 39 (1985): 161-173.

O'Hearn, Carolyn. "Recognizing the Learning Disabled College Writer." *College English* 51.3 (1989): 294-304.

Richards, Amy. "College Composition: Recognizing the Learning Disabled Writer." *Journal of Basic Writing* 4.2 (1985): 68-79.

Vogel, Susan A. "Syntactic Complexity in Written Expression of LD College Writers." *Annals of Dyslexia* 35 (1985): 137-157.

Vogel, Susan A., and Dee Konrad. "Characteristic Written Expressive Language Deficits of the Learning Disabled: Some General and Specific Intervention Strategies." *Journal of Reading, Writing, and Learning Disabilities* 4.2 (1988): 89-99.

Vogel, Susan A., and Mary Ross Moran. "Written Language

Disorders in Learning Disabled Students: A Preliminary Report." *The 18th International Conference of the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities.* Eds. William M. Cruickshank and Janet W. Lerner. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1982. 211-225.

Wallace, Gerald, Sandra B. Cohen, and Edward A. Polloway. *Language Arts: Teaching Exceptional Children.* Austin: Pro-ed, 1987. See especially Chapter 8, "Written Expression," 305-343.

Wong, Bernice Y.L., Roderick Wong, and Jennifer Blenkinsop. "Cognitive and Metacognitive Aspects of Learning Disabled Adolescents' Composing Problems." *Learning Disability Quarterly* 12.4 (1989): 300-322.

Wong, Bernice Y.L., Roderick Wong, Deanna Darlington, and Wayne Jones. "Interactive Teaching: An Effective Way to Teach Revision Skills to Adolescents with Learning Disabilities." *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice* 6.2 (1991): 117-127.

Zink, Karl E. *Let Me Try to Make It Clearer: Alternative Techniques for Teaching Traditional English Grammar to Learning Disabled Students in the University.* Ellensburg, Washington: Central Washington University Instructional Media Center, 1982.

4. Bibliography to provide overview

I recommend only works suggested in my reading list, but this bibliography lists additional works for those whose focus is not solely on college writers.

Newcomer, Phyllis L., and Edna M. Barenbaum. "The Written Composing Ability of Children with Learning Disabilities: A Review of the Literature from 1980-1990." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 24.10 (1991): 578-593.

5. Article specific to writing centers

Marek, Margaret-Rose. "Right Brain Processing and Learning Disabilities: Conclusions Not to Reach in the Writing Center." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 16.4-5 (1991-1992): 14-18.

Conclusion

As the bibliographies included within these works cited alone attest, there are virtually thousands of articles published on LD students and writing. However, many define and demonstrate the writing process and are therefore unnecessary for composition instructors and tutors. Many others show research without case studies, analyses, and suggestions and so are irrelevant for this particular focus. Moreover, some of the professionals in special education listed here have written scores of other articles about LD and writing, but I have listed only those which seem particularly helpful to college instructors and tutors.

Tracey Baker
University of Alabama at Birmingham

2nd (Inter)National Writing Centers Conference
St. Louis, MO
28-30 September 1995

The National Writing Centers Association (NWCA), in conjunction with the Midwest Writing Centers Association (MWCA), is pleased to announce the 2nd (Inter)National Writing Centers Conference, on September 28-30, 1995, in St. Louis, Missouri.

Recognizing writing center diversity, the conference will offer many topics and presentation formats. Anticipated topics include:

> elementary, secondary and post-secondary writing centers; publishing, scholarship, and professional activity; writing centers and technology; writing centers in electronic environments, writing centers' new frontiers; special needs; administrative systems; mission statements and longitudinal plans; a mentor network; writing center history; critical reconsiderations of theory and practice; disseminating research projects; developing outreach and service projects; initial and advanced staff training; defining NWCA's agenda.

The program will consist of workshops, interactive sessions, working sessions, demonstrations, poster presentations, and formal papers.

All interested parties—writing center directors, staff, consultants, personnel; writing teachers; undergraduate and graduate students in composition studies; writing program, public and private school administrators; staff development leaders, etc.—around the world are invited to submit proposals for the conference. Specific proposal guidelines and other relevant information are listed in the proposal form.

Deadline: February 1, 1995 (notification by March 1, 1995). For proposal forms and further information, contact Eric Hobson, Conference Chair, St. Louis College of Pharmacy, 4588 Parkview Place, St. Louis, MO 63110. Phone 314-367-8700, ext. 244. E-mail: ehobson@medicine.wustl.edu

Getting the picture:
Dramatization as a tutoring tool

The technique of dramatizing, as explicated by Kenneth Burke, can be one of the most multi-faceted tools of the peer tutor. Dramatization consists of devising an anecdote or situation to represent the concept of a piece of writing—making the general specific. Burke stipulates that a dramatization must include an *act* (what took place in thought or deed), a *scene* (situation or background of the act), an *agent* (who performed the act), an *agency* (how the act was done), and a *purpose* (intentions and results of the act). These correspond to the what, when and where, who, how, and why of basic journalism, and also reflects many common tutoring tactics. They are the almost universal building blocks used to convey information, which is one of the basic aims of writing. Dramatization is ideal for the tutoring relationship, because there is an actual dramatic event, a question-and-answer dialog, taking place, and the student therefore has a head start on the process.

To use the technique of dramatization, the tutor must help the student create a series of pictures in his mind related to his writing. A communications professor at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs used a simple demonstration when he was teaching writing at the junior high level. He took a series of slides of the route from the school to 7-11. Each was different, but each contained one element from the previous slide. He then mixed the slides up and had the students put them back in the right order, which they did easily. "This," he then told them, "is what good writing does." Each sentence or paragraph should be non repetitive, contributing something unique, yet connected in a logical way to what comes before and what goes after it. Initiating a mental movie helps make relationships and con-

nections clear. This is especially true for the novice writer, who is comfortable with visual media like television but less used to the written word. Writing without a clear mental picture is like trying to construct a building without a blueprint.

How can tutors implement dramatization in a tutoring situation? What kinds of questions should they ask? A tutor needs to help students search for a situation that expresses their ideas—what Burke calls the "representative anecdote." Often the best anecdotes are found in the writer's own experience. Inexperienced writers will usually not be conscious of the value of their experiences; they often don't think of themselves as writers and are groping for something "out there" rather than trying to express something within themselves. While discussing a topic, students often allude to a personal experience. The tutor needs to be aware of and key in on these comments. Or, she can generate them by asking, "Has anything ever happened to you that makes you feel strongly about this (or believe this, or reach this conclusion)? How did you feel? How do you think the other person felt? What did you do to try and resolve the situation? Did it work? Why or why not?" By this time, the student should have generated a clear picture of the incident. The tutor can then relate this experience back to the student's paper, and begin to draw parallels, expose inconsistencies, and form connections.

Actors use these same techniques to bring written work—a play—to life for themselves, and for an audience. Using past actual events is called emotional memory; when no such events exist, the actor invents a specific "*as if*. . ." ("react to this situation as if it were your own child at risk," for instance). Writers, too,

can create imaginary experiences. A tutor working with a student writing a paper on reforming health care might ask, "What if you were in an auto accident, unable to work, and had no insurance?" or, conversely, "What would you do if you were a small business owner, just breaking even, and health insurance rates for your workers jumped 50%?" Dramatization thus enables the student to explore several facets of a problem.

Often, incidents generated this way make excellent examples in papers. The tutor can also use these strategies to explore examples already in the paper, helping the student to see why and how examples do or do not support a thesis. For instance, a student examining pollution-related diseases may have thrown in some statistics on deforestation. The tutor might ask, "Suppose you were a doctor opening a clinic just for pollution-related disease. What would you need to treat?" The tutee will be able to see that deforestation would not be treated in a clinic, because it isn't related to disease. Then the tutor can help the writer decide whether to throw the example out or put it in another paragraph.

Dramatization can apply to all the chronological stages of the writing process: past, present, and future. The past is what student writers bring to the work, both from the source works and their own thoughts and experiences. Dealing with the past is especially effective when writing about literature: "What might have happened to the poet to make him feel this way? Have you had an experience like that?" or "Why did the character do that? What were her other choices in that situation?" But, it can be used across most disciplines: "What evidence did the author use to reach this conclusion? Can you think of a situation that

shows this principle in action?" Dramatizing in the present can range from almost purely subjective—the student's personal "as ifs"—to objective: "What are the current statistics on this problem? How does that affect the lives of actual people?" The future can also be probed: "If this solution were implemented, what would happen in the government? To individual consumers?"

What are the benefits of dramatization? Once the writer creates a mental script, she is able to grasp ideas that may have been too abstract, complicated, or vague for her when they were "only words." Wrestling logical ideas onto paper is usually foreign to new writers. By relating them to something that strikes a personal, responsive chord in her own imagination, the writer brings them to life for herself, which is the crucial first step in making them alive for the reader.

By examining his ideas in a dramatic way, the student writer discovers how he feels and thinks about an issue. This enables him to find a point of view, develop an identity as a writer, and form a stance, rather than reacting to a possibly fuzzy view of what he thinks the teacher wants. His ideas begin to *belong* to him. Using dramatization, he can see what is more (or less) important, arranging the facts and clarifying relationships between them. He can also find gaps where questions remain unanswered. By clothing the inanimate structure of ideas in actual-seeming situations, the novice writer's ideas gain a sense of reality.

Dramatization not only helps student writers understand their own concepts, but can also give them invaluable strategies for communicating their concepts to an audience. First, it gives them more of a stake in the communication process. They *want* someone to grasp an idea that has become a personal vision; they might not have cared otherwise. It is also a useful tool for increasing awareness of the audience. "Imagine someone reading this paper. What sort of ideas might she have before she reads it? How would you like to influence those ideas? If you were the reader, what questions about this subject could you come up with?"

Learning produced by dramatization is both inductive, leading students to draw general conclusions from personal, specific instances, and heuristic, teaching them not only facts, but *how to learn* for themselves. This supports the aims of any good tutor. Dramatization provides tools to assist student writers in both of the primary tasks of writing: that of exploring and arranging their own ideas, and of communicating those ideas successfully to an audience. It makes their concepts less abstract and more concrete. Dramatization also facilitates the job of the tutor by providing *her* with the tools to apply writing theory in a way that is practical for both herself and the student. We only truly learn those things that affect us personally, and dramatization makes that happen.

Sue Grise
University of Colorado
at Colorado Springs

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Summer Institute for Developmental Educators

The Kellogg Institute for the Training and Certification of Developmental Educators will hold its 1995 summer institute from June 23 through July 21, on the campus of Appalachian State University in Boone, NC. The 1995 Institute will train faculty, counselors, and administrators from developmental and learning assistance programs in techniques for promoting learning improvement. The program will focus on the use of learning styles and their implications for instruction, the process of designing and implementing developmental evaluation activities, adult development theories, and the use of computers for management, data collection, and instructional purposes.

Applications and additional information may be obtained from Elaini Bingham, Director of the Kellogg Institute, National Center for Developmental Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 (704-262-3057). The application deadline is March 15, 1995.

Call for Papers from Graduate Students

Graduate students in rhetoric and composition are invited to submit papers on the topic of entering the discipline, for the Fifth Annual Symposium on the Teaching of Composition, at Texas Christian U., on February 25, 1995. This year's symposium, "What Comes after Composition and Rhetoric?: Issues Facing the Discipline," features keynote speaker Janice Lauer. The winner will be a featured speaker at the symposium and receive a registration waiver, a commemorative plaque, and a $50 award. Students should submit two copies of the manuscript, not to exceed 10 pages double-spaced, and an abstract, not to exceed 125 words. The contestant's name, address, affiliation, and phone number should appear on the cover sheet only; the manuscript should include no internal reference to the author. Papers cannot have been submitted to other conferences or have been previously published. Submit papers by Dec. 1, 1994, to Rachelle M. Smith, Symposium Coordinator. English, Box 32872, Texas Christian U., Fort Worth, TX 76129.

TUTORS' COLUMN

My interest in learning about inappropriate peer tutor responses developed as a result of a mistake I made with a student. I have discovered that to know and respect the intent of the writer, in both subject and conveyance, is essential. She knows best what she wants to communicate; her reader/critic must not allow her own idea of what the writer "meant " to say to "dictate choices that properly belong to the writer" (Brannon and Knoblauch 159). I also learned that our own biases and doubts will inevitably affect our ability to judge a student's work objectively.

In a tutorial, a student whom I tutored chose to focus on her first sexual encounter, and initially her mode of expression seemed confessional. Her ideas lacked coherence, so we began by discussing her various impressions. During this stage of the writing process she realized that her true purpose in writing was to communicate that "it's okay to say no." Her focus became less personal, and more socially relevant. She returned later with a more fleshed out paper, complete with some very graphic details of the evening. I praised her use of very powerful images and the courage I imagined it had taken to reveal some very private, and possibly painful, memories. I then cautioned her about the feelings of embarrassment or awkwardness she might experience when sharing the paper with her response group in class. I also mentioned that some students might not be mature enough to respond sensitively to her work.

I wasn't sure if I had handled this in the right manner at the time. My ambivalence was shattered, however, when I read her own comments on the writing process. She had fully expected others to react strongly to what she had written.

In fact, that was the effect she sought. She realized her own personal revelation could help others facing the same decision. Both women and men could benefit: women by realizing that they had a choice, men by being exposed to the fears women possess. Luckily, she had enough belief in her abilities as a writer and the message she wanted to share to overcome the discouragement she'd been given. And discouragement it was, no matter how subtle the form.

It would have been a simple matter for me to ask why she'd chosen to use such strong images. I didn't. I assumed that she didn't know what she was getting into and advised her accordingly. Funny. I'd never presume to advise a D.H. Lawrence or Anais Nin on the same subject. As Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, in their article "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts," point out:

> We tolerate the writer's manipulation of the way we see the subject that is being addressed. Our tolerance derives from a tacit acceptance of the writer's "authority" to make the statements we are reading. . . . As readers, we see this harder material as a problem of interpretation, not a shortcoming of the composer. (157)

The assumptions we bring to the reading of any literary text should be the same as the ones with which we approach a student's text. Instead of looking for error, or expecting error, we need to give students the benefit of our doubt. We need to believe that they know, better than we, what they want to communicate.

It is virtually impossible to approach a student's work objectively. Peter Elbow offers the following advice to teachers

(which applies to tutors as well):
> [They] should reveal their own position, particularly doubts, ambivalences and biases. They should show they are still learning, still willing to look at things in new ways. . . still engaged in the interminable process of working out the relationship between what we teach and the rest of our lives. (332)

I have always been afraid to reveal much of myself in my writing. My papers have always had a rather detached, careful voice. So, in essence, I transferred my own fear of personal revelation onto the student writer. I was able to assuage my guilt a bit by sharing this insight with her. I also let her know she had taught me something valuable about the role of a tutor and about the risks I might take to improve my own writing. This student and I have been working together all semester and both of us continue to learn. I think my own gaffe (and acknowledgment of it) may have actually helped to establish a partnership from which we could both gain experience and understanding.

Mary Beth Tegan
Peer Tutor
California State University
Northridge, CA

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Accountability of writing center consultants: How far can it go?

In the last few years, institutions have asked many questions about their writing centers. What role do centers play in writing programs? Should the writing consultants be undergrads or graduates? Should consultants be paid, should they volunteer, or should they earn credit hours? One of the most burning questions of today's writing programs, however, is the question of the consultants' accountability for the student work brought to writing centers. From the view of both administrators and consultants, the question of accountability is important because responsibility for the work must be designated to someone—whether that person be the student writer, the consultant, the instructor, or the department itself.

This accountability concern originates in the nationwide search for a clearly defined, departmentally acceptable purpose for writing centers. Many institutions with writing centers are unsure of the center's reason for being, and it is this blissful ignorance that lies behind much of the confusion or myths surrounding the accountability of student work passing through writing centers. Muriel Harris notes that both the English department and the student body hold myths about the role of the writing center. Harris suggests that these writing center myths include the common and mistaken belief "that the tutors write the papers for the students and/or hand them the answers they should be finding themselves, [and finally] that the tutors offer evaluative comments" (18).

Diana George also voices concern over the inaccuracy of writing center knowledge held within institutions when she dishearteningly notes that "many still do not know us, do not know what we can offer them, do not know how we work

with students" (38). Harris concludes her discussion on myths surrounding the writing center with the regret that the "most blatant blindness and the most simplistic views are held by colleagues in our departments who are otherwise interested in and knowledgeable about the teaching of writing" (19). Clearly people are confused about the writing center's true role in student writing.

Many critics of writing centers either have forgotten or perhaps do not realize that the whole mission of writing centers is to help produce, as North pointed out, "better writers, not better writing" (438). Instead many critics see writing centers as centers of plagiarism, of remediation, of—God forbid—*collaborative* writing. It is true that collaboration plays a key role in writing center consultations; the problem is, however, that these critics of writing centers do not recognize that this collaboration is steeped in limited, shared *effort*, rather that shared *writing*. Collaborative or shared *effort* clearly limits writing center consultants to a guiding or advising role in the writing, and does not include the consultant actually sharing the action of writing—a limited collaboration which consequently also limits responsibility for the paper to the student. Collaborative or shared *writing*, however, suggests that *both* the consultant and the student writer create a document together, a shared document rather than a guided one. Most writing centers aim for a limited collaborative effort rather than collaborative writing in their consultations because writing center theory suggests that, in order for students to become more effective writers, students must recognize their ultimate responsibility for their work.

Writing center consultants do play active guiding roles within their consulta-

tions because they help students battle problems within their papers, but both students and instructors should be aware that consultants offer only a guided or advised tour of the students' paper. Consultants must consequently ensure that student writers recognize that they themselves retain all responsibility for their work, despite the advice they may receive from consultants. Students should know that consultants offer only limited advice in order that the student writer may become an independent and confident writer who not only can fulfill the given assignment, but also writing assignments in other classes.

From student writers' perspective, however, misconceptions about writing centers are quite easily absorbed. Students may hear in the halls and dorms that "there's a place in English where they'll help you with your papers...." A correct fact indeed, but to many students' literal minds, the "helping with papers" can quite easily metamorphose into the writing center's adoption of the students' original documents. Thus, these nebulous myths can rapidly convert some of the consultation into battles of accountability between student writers and consultants. With students working from a dependent view of writing and with consultants working from a guiding view, it is not surprising that some consultations result in defensive or conflicting roles of the session participants.

These conflicting student/consultant beliefs of writing center roles are also partially attributable to instructors who unwittingly misrepresent the center's function to their students. Instructors are just as vulnerable as students to writing center lore, and since classes and faculty advice are often the students' first introduction to writing centers, writing center

directors should ensure that both instructors and their students are cognizant of the truly limited role of writing centers in student writing.

Since students are the primary reason for writing centers' existence, however, centers must obviously work to clarify their role with this population as well as with the students' instructors. Too often, students arrive at writing centers already on the defensive, having been sent there by well-meaning instructors to "have" the centers help with the students' assignment, a week-old assignment with which the students have struggled the night before, an assignment due the following day (if they're lucky; today, if they've really procrastinated). And too often, these students arrive expecting miracles to occur, and an A paper to be born quite literally before their eyes, while they sit and watch, a passive but proud parent. Too often, it is these students, the ones who most need the center's services, who, once informed of their continued responsibility for their work, feel that they have been misled, that they have been victims of fraudulent advertising, that the writing center has not done its duty, and who will not appear again in the center portals.

Consultants trying to aid these students are placed in a trying position. With very little time to perform major reconstructive or even constructive surgery upon misshapen or unborn papers, consultants may become almost as frustrated as the students. Early in the session, these consultants reluctantly recognize that not only do they have to illuminate these wishful student writers of the writing center's true limited role, but they must also inform these writers that they have come to the center with too little time and preparation to help the paper out of the intensive care unit.

This dual frustration of both students and consultants can quite easily spread to the students' instructors who assigned the papers which sent the students to the writing center in the first place. Some

misinformed instructors may consequently send a barrage of complaints echoing down the halls about how "useless the center is if they don't help the students we send down there." Clearly, this question of responsibility for the paper must be solved for the question of writing center accountability to approach resolution.

The question then is this: when students appear in writing centers with poorly prepared pre-writing, whose responsibility is it to pull the papers out of the pit of despair? The responsibility is, of course, the student's. It is of course the student's responsibility to do the assignment. It is of course the student's responsibility to be prepared. It is the writing center's responsibility to help students become more proficient and competent writers. Student writers, however, must be informed and taught that the writing center's responsibility is to help the students become improved writers, and that it is *not* the writing center's responsibility to ensure that the student receives an A for the work. The grade for the work, whether or not that work has passed through writing center hands, remains and will always remain the student's own responsibility.

But how can writing centers best achieve this goal of metamorphosing defensive, dependent, and insecure writers into improved, independent, and confident writers cognizant of their ownership of their work? The answer is the writing center's emphasis upon limited collaboration and the creation of an education network within its institution. Students and their instructors must be assured and informed that the work occurring in the center is not aid bordering upon plagiarism, but is instead a limited collaborative effort—the key term there being *limited*. Both student writers and consultants may collaboratively work on a paper, but consultants should constantly ask for student input and advice on "fixing" problems within the paper. Active involvement in the consultation may be the most effective way for stu-

dent writers to accept continued responsibility for their papers and to recognize and build upon their own knowledge and writing ability.

Students must realize that writing centers are places where students will be shown the necessary tools to become an independent writer. They must recognize that centers are part of an educational institution, not places that will complete an assignment for them. Consultants must therefore limit themselves to guiding student writers through discussions of the writing process and customizing the sessions to each student's need. Whatever the writing needs of the students, however, consultants should continually emphasize the student writers' role and responsibility for their work.

The assistance offered by consultants must be limited, it is true, but this limited aid is only useful to the student writers if the consultants have determined that these students are aware of and able to correct their writing weaknesses. Limiting the role of writing centers will not help to develop "better writers" if centers do not provide advice and guidance to student writers who are unaware of their writing problems. This limited aid is a quandary to consultants because of the question, "How much is too much?" Of course, consultants should not expand their limited collaborative effort to working through entire student documents for errors because we are then facing the question of proofreading and its reduction of accountability. Consultants should ensure, however, that student writers can see and know how to correct their writing, particularly these students' recurring writing problems. Many student writers have problems within their work because they are unaware of both the errors and the solutions to these weaknesses. Thus, the role of the consultant should be to help clarify effective writing techniques to these inexperienced writers and to avoid assuming that these writers recognize and correct their problems within their documents. If stu-

dents were aware of and able to correct their writing weaknesses, these writers would probably not be visiting the writing center.

The question now is how to ensure that the institution understands the true role of writing centers in student writing. The answer is obviously through education, both in and out of writing centers. To ensure that their centers meet their non-judgmental/non-ownership roles in student consultations, writing center directors can offer professional development workshops to educate the consultants in *guided* as opposed to *directed* tutorials. These workshops may help consultants extricate themselves from some of the battles for accountability which occasionally occur.

Directors can also investigate and offer workshops to help consultants interpret verbal cues from student writers because these cues may help to alleviate any conflict between student and consultant interpretation of roles. Louise Z. Smith suggests that writing center consultations are steeped in psychological cues indicating the student writers' conscious or unconscious recognition of responsibility toward their writing. The consultants' ability to recognize and interpret student behavior and conversation may help them avoid unnecessarily tense or conflicting sessions with potentially dependent student writers.

Of the three theories prescribed by family systems experts, Smith suggests that the "systems" model is the most relevant model for application to writing center conferences because this model emphasizes "communication and behavioral change" (62). Smith also suggests that writing center consultations resemble "families" in that both can be defined as "systems" which are organizationally complex, open, adaptive and information-processing" (62). Both of these systems, the family and the writing center consultations, demonstrate four types of roles: movers, followers, opposers, and bystanders. Each of these

roles interacts with authority and may reflect the roles played by both consultants and student writers within the consultations: the movers claim authority; the followers acknowledge it; the opposers resist it; and the bystanders choose to abstain until they feel comfortable enough to choose one of the other three roles (64).

Unfortunately, each role can be used to manipulate another role into a particular psychological position, and clearly, consultants must be aware of this possible manipulation by student writers and by themselves. Smith suggests that the primary terms for the roles manipulated in writing center conferences are those of "persecutor," "victim," and "rescuer" with students and consultants equally likely to unwittingly (or wittingly) play different roles during the consultation (64). Consultants should be aware of this varied role-playing which may mask student insecurities about writing, and should manipulate these roles themselves if necessary to redirect responsibility for the paper.

An example of this psychological role manipulation may include such extreme examples as the following student who seeks help in beginning a paper on *Hamlet*. Having lost the class notes and the handout listing possible topics, and being unable to find anything riveting about the play from a personal point of view, the student presents a convincing picture of herself as the victim of society, of bad luck, and of school. Frustrated consultants may well end up in the roles of either "persecutor" ("You can't find *anything* about the play which interest you?" with its suggested criticism) or "rescuer" ("Why don't you write about this topic? . . . look at this soliloquy") (65-66). Either of these roles, imposed by dependent students, may force writing center consultants into the hierarchical position of expert and consequently into the "morally obligated" role of "rescuer," and thus the proud new "owner" of the student's paper.

The question now is how can consultants help this type of dependent student writer without donning the garb (and the responsibility) of either persecutors or rescuers? Consultants could aid these writers by helping them find the real reason they are avoiding the paper assignment. By asking students exactly what they want the consultants to do, consultants may discover that students merely need encouragement to talk to the professor about the students' needs in terms of the course, or perhaps the students feel overwhelmed by their possibly first encounter with Shakespeare. By redirecting the roles of rescuer from consultant to student and by erasing the role of persecutor from the consultation, consultants may convert the session into an essentially self-help consultation with students recognizing both their responsibility for the work and their knowledge of the play.

Consultants can also recognize that continually "helping" these "victims" will not help in the long run. The extreme guidance possibly sought by these writers may eventually lead to dependence upon the center and ultimately roles of victim from which students may find it hard to extricate themselves. Clearly, discussing the assignment in terms of the students' needs and questions facilitates the students' recognition of their accountability for the work.

Lex Runciman also suggests that, in order to clarify the limits of the collaborative role of writing centers, consultants spend "considerable time discussing the mutuality of the writing conference" (30). Clearly, both Runciman and Smith believe that consultants must emphasize the active, mutual, and limited collaborative effort (not writing) within the consultation to ensure that the session portrays the true student-centered aid offered by writing centers. Consultants therefore must emphasize to student writers possibly seeking dependency that centers are not intensive care units for papers, but rather are health maintenance organizations or wellness centers to

which papers can be brought before the documents are in a critical state of being. By emphasizing student responsibility for the paper, consultants may prevent any battle of accountability before the battles start.

As well as educating consultants, and simultaneously student writers, in the true role of writing centers, writing center directors must also work laterally to ensure that all faculty, both full- and part-time, are aware of the writing center's services and the limits of its responsibilities. As Carolyn Walker notes, "We are the ones who need to make the effort, who need to reach out to the faculty. We cannot wait for them to come to us" (13). Lady Falls Brown also emphasizes the need for increased and consistent communication with the faculty for the success of writing centers. In her article, Brown notes that most writing center patrons come from the first year English classes most frequently taught by part-time instructors and teaching assistants, an instructor population with a relatively high turn-over. Brown suggests that writing center directors cannot therefore assume a constant pool of accurate writing center knowledge floating down the halls to this transient (and to the more permanent) population of instructors. Directors should work to actively promote their centers and to educate their colleagues about their centers' services. While all student writers should be welcomed to the writing center, all must be simultaneously reminded and educated by their instructors and by the writing center's staff that entrance into the center does not mean students can relinquish all responsibility for their work.

One possible reason for the accountability battle within writing centers may be the traditional remedial connotation attached to the word "tutor." Throughout this essay, I have used the word "consultant" to define the assistants within the center because I, like many

others, believe that "tutor" suggests a more directive and remediated writing aid than that for which most writing center directors strive. Runciman suggests that the writing center definition of "tutoring" is far different from the traditional one of "aiding one that needs remediation" (30). According to Runciman, writing center tutoring refers to a "collaborative session of learning and discussion" (30) instead of a session running along more hierarchical lines. However, despite the customized definition of a collaborative "tutor" within writing centers, Runciman suggests that many writing centers' "identity" (and consequently their accountability) problems originate within the traditional hierarchical definitions of the terms "tutor/tutee," and he recommends that centers choose different terms to describe their participants (30). I recommend using either "assistant" or "consultant" in all writing center references and consultations because both of these terms avoid any determination of consultant expertise, hierarchical relationship, and consequently responsibility for student work.

Obviously, writing center directors must work to educate all populations in their center's institution to ensure a true institutional comprehension of writing centers' limited roles in student writing. Directors must work to educate their consultants and their colleagues. Consultants must work to educate themselves through current reading and discussion of writing center theory on electronic lists such as WCenter and during professional development workshops. Both consultants and instructors must work to educate the student writers with whom they work, so that these student writers have no doubt that, no matter how many times they visit the writing center, the responsibility for their papers remains their own. Only through this sustained and institutional-wide network of education can writing centers avoid the battles of accountability with which writing center consultations are so com-

monly fraught. And only by educating their patrons, their consultants, and their colleagues within the department, can centers achieve their true goal, that of developing "better writers, not better writing" (North 438).

Amanda Inskip Corcoran
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, TX

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WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Responding (or not) as readers in context

This is the last column dealing with the two sets of scenarios I offered in previous *Writing Lab Newsletters*, and I admit to a certain sense of puzzlement about what to say this month. I received far fewer responses to my second set of scenarios (concerning the young woman who wrote an abusive letter to a government official/a college professor/a roommate/her parents) than I did to the first (concerning students who wrote papers about affirmative action). This leaves me with a rather profound lack of "reader response" to report on in this column, and it also forces me to wonder why the number of replies was so underwhelming.

As I see it, there are three possible reasons for the overall silence, to whit: (1) ethical issues that involve racial concerns are far more compelling than questions about how to handle angry students writing personal attacks, (2) tutorial strategies for handling an abusive or inappropriate tone in letters are more clear-cut and less controversial than the strategies needed to resolve the complex sociocultural concerns implicated by the students in the first set of scenarios; (3) readers were just too darned busy with other things (like teaching, students, professional conferences, personal lives, children, administrative work, et al., ad infinitum) to write detailed responses to these scenarios. Boy... it makes me wonder where these people's priorities are. (joke! joke!)

Actually, I suspect that all three of these reasons were important factors. My personal experiences argue pretty strongly for reason #1: When I've presented these two scenario sets in workshops, the first always generates more heat (and light) than the second. Writing center staffs have clearly thought and

talked a good deal more about politically-charged student essays than emotionally-charged ones, and I suspect consultants and directors have a good deal more personal investment in their responses to the former than to the latter. Reason #3 also seems perfectly reasonable to me personally. I know that my own life tends to get quite hectic in mid-February with the beginning of a new semester and an impending 4C's conference, so I'm not surprised that few people can squeeze out the time to write. (When I think of all the surveys I've been asked to complete over the last few years that I've not had the chance to get to... sorry!)

For both these reasons, I'm all the more grateful to Barbara Hudson of Whatcom Community College and Laura Marsee of East Central University for taking the time to write to me with their impressions. Their responses, in fact, provide compelling evidence that reason #2 listed above is also quite true. Both of these writers centered their commentary on how they would handle the student in each of these scenarios, and both offered essentially the same set of tutorial strategies for every case: get the student to reconsider her audience, her purpose in writing, and whether the tone of the letter would accomplish any worthwhile or productive goals.

"I would try to explain to the student that the essential purpose of her letter, regardless of its audience or topic, is to solve a problem she perceives by persuading her audience —the receiver—to agree with her position... I feel the student's anger is the most important aspect of this writing project, the aspect which will work against her the most as she attempts to persuade her

letter's recipient. I would point out that her hostile tone and language is neither appropriate nor effective toward accomplishing her goal."
[Laura Marsee]

"One approach to this would be to discuss what kind of effect she is trying to have on her audience. We believed that it was important to find out from the student if she is simply trying to anger the congressman and teacher or if she is actually trying to make the person listen to her. The session would be much more productive if she is trying to make the individual listen; that way we could give good constructive advice to her, such as the possible use of specifics to make a strong point instead of strong language." [Barbara Hudson]

The strong common thread running through these two responses indicates to me that the proffered strategy ("consider your tone and its effects on your audience") has become a kind of trope in writing center conferences, particularly when students are expressing themselves—and their emotions—more strongly than we would like. I don't really want to object to this approach; for most situations when academic and/or persuasive writing is called for by a particular assignment or self-sponsored rhetorical task, considerations of desired outcomes, audience expectations, and "appropriate" tone are perfectly legitimate. We work in academic institutions that tend to valorize certain types of discourse in student writing (rational, reasonable, objective — what Kinneavy has called the "Referential" or "Persuasive" aims of discourse), and we tend to give students advice which helps them conform more fully to these normative dis-

course conventions. That is all well and good. But we must also be aware at the same time that the "ethical" decision we make about what to help students with and how we should help them is a decision which is grounded in a particular social and professional context.

There is nothing inherently wrong or unethical, I think, with helping people to write really biting or nasty prose—if that's what they really want to do—as long as it does not violate the implicit social contract that regulates the terms of our interaction. In other words, if a friend came to see me at home and asked me to help write a really vicious and wicked letter of the kind we have been discussing here, I would probably ask if he was sure he wanted to write the letter in just that way, and then—quite possibly—help him out. But on the other hand, if this same friend came to see me in the writing center with the same request, I would flatly refuse to help him in the way he desired. As I stated in last month's column, "When I work as a consultant in the writing center, I'm do- ing so as a professional in a professional capacity and as a representative of my home institution." I do not see this as a hypocritical stance. I see it, rather, as a simple, pragmatic awareness that we don many hats in our daily lives and fulfill many social roles, and the ethics we adopt in a writing center situation may be quite different from those we embrace elsewhere.

Michael A. Pemberton
University of Illinois,
Urbana-Champaign

South Central Writing Centers Association

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Papers are invited on all aspects of writing center theory and practice, including writing center administration, peer tutor training, and assessment/evaluation. Abstracts (150 words maximum) are due by Jan. 16, 1995. For more information, contact Martha Dale Cooley, English Department and Writing Center, P.O. Box 7810, Henderson State University, Arkadelphia, AR 71999-0001 (501-230-5283; e-mail: cooley@holly.hsu.edu).

THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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

Address correction requested