THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

...FROM THE EDITOR...

What do contact zones, border-lands, football coaches, bridges, laws of robotics, pen ownership, exor-cism, and arcs have in common—be-sides, that is, being critical to the themes of articles and columns in this issue of the newsletter? Of course they all pop from the minds of inventive writers who know how to capture our imaginations and light up our thinking. In terms of writing tutorials, they also involve interac-tion and/or connection, the back and forth motion that defines our ap-proach to learning.

And, speaking of motion, I hope that you are all making plans for less of that in the next few weeks. As everyone drifts off for well-earned vacation relaxing, I wish for us all some "quality R&R time."

Happy holidays, a great 1995, peace.

    • *Muriel Harris, editor*

...INSIDE...

Writing centers as linguistic contact zones and borderlands

The "Contact Zone" and "Borderland" metaphors are excellent heuristics for analyzing writing center work. Both can help explain the position of the writing center vis-a-vis the larger academic com-munity, although, as I'll show, this par-ticular "spatial" application of the meta-phors invites the temptation to romanticize the writing center and its staff and students as victims of the power structure. I will argue that both metaphors can be applied just as produc-tively and without danger of exaggera-tion to analyze the written and oral texts of the writing center as contact literature and contact dialect—the "arts of the con-tact zone" (Pratt). After I explain the derivations and uses of contact zone and borderland and how the metaphors do and do not apply to the writing center's place, space, and mission in the acad-emy, I will analyze the writing center's texts as contact zone creations, demon-strating how the center functions specifi-cally as linguistic contact zone and bor-derland. Thus, I will show how the spatial applications of the metaphors

may not be as helpful for revealing the nature of writing center work as the linguistic applications.

Contact Zone Analogies

Mary Louise Pratt defines contact zones as "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath. . . ." Writing centers are contact zones because they serve and respect U.S. and international students and their di-

verse cultural, language, and disciplinary backgrounds. Within the academy the writing center is the contact zone where different cultures, languages, literacies, and discourses "meet, clash, and grapple with one another." The center is a "disciplinary borderland" where the rhetorics of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences meet—to both intersect and conflict.

Thus, the writing center's mission is a borderland one—to help students articulate the cultural and rhetorical similarities and differences they observe and confront; to help them "grapple with" or negotiate between and among intersecting and clashing cultures, languages, literacies, discourses, and disciplines; to help them decide when to follow organizational and stylistic conventions (e.g. place thesis at the beginning, avoid using "I") and when to take risks and violate them—instead of being "violated" by them.

The "asymmetrical relations of power" that Pratt says often structure the contact zone contribute to the violence of language contact—the clashing, the colliding, the grating, and grinding emphasized by J. Elspeth Stuckey in *The Violence of Literacy*. Using the U.S.-Mexico borderland as her point of reference, Gloria Anzaldua also explores the violence of the contact zone when she calls it an open wound—"la herida abierta"—where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. In the writing center as the site of struggle within the academic hierarchy of asymmetrical power relations, the more powerful discourses of the academy sometimes grate against the discourses students bring with them. Those who work in writing centers do indeed witness open wounds and bleeding, although the brutality is usually psychological and metaphorical; the students' wounds are psychic, their egos and papers are bleeding, their selves as readers and writers are violated. How often do writing center tutors hear tales of students who are "dissed" (disrespected), their work "trashed" (put down) by a harsh system of rewards and

punishments? (More on writing center slang later.) Students' psychic pain could indeed become economic and physical if, for example, they lose financial aid, graduate school, and professional opportunities because of the effects of "academic hazing." The writing center invariably becomes a recovery room and trauma center where students come to heal the wounds inflicted on them most likely by those higher on the ladder.

On the other hand, if we carry the "open wound" aspect of the contact zone analogy too far in situating writing center work, we distort and trivialize the very real physical suffering and death in very real borderlands, the extermination of indigenous peoples in Latin America and the U.S. and the political situation to which Anzaldua is referring: the economic and physical humiliation of undocumented Mexicans who give their life savings to coyotes to cross the Mexico-U.S. border only to be captured and deported. We must admit that the "highly asymmetrical relations of power such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath" in Pratt's definition of contact zone are not as prevalent in U.S. institutions of higher education. U.S. colleges and universities are not purposefully and blatantly oppressive and colonial, as some of our governmental, penal, or mental institutions are, although universities certainly do have colonizing features, especially their intimate relationships with corporations and the state and their complicity in the more sinister endeavors of capitalism and imperialism such as defense and weapons research. Even though we and our students may feel exploited and violated at times by our institutions, we are not slaves, peasants, or undocumented workers. Writing about the politics of higher education, Rose Mancuso Edwards reminds us that even the term "disadvantaged college students" is an oxymoron when considered in the context of the urban underemployed underclass that did not even complete high school. In addition, most of us who staff writing centers have chosen to do so, preferring colleges to cor-

porations or government agencies, consciously choosing the borderland site of the writing center over more "central" positions in our departments or units. Somehow I doubt that Frantz Fanon was referring to us or even to most of our students when he spoke of the "Wretched of the Earth."

Therefore, while we do acknowledge the psychic and economic violence in the writing center as site of struggle and site of recovery, taking care not to exaggerate our conditions of oppression and overanalogize the center as open wound, it is equally necessary to emphasize the creative, generative, and combinatory aspects of cultural and linguistic contact that occur within a writing center. When cultures and languages meet and rub against one another, deplorable things occur, but astonishing things do, too. Sparks fly, humor happens, surprising new combinations emerge; sometimes out of open wounds, new texts and forms of consciousness are born, new genres of what Braj Kachru calls "contact literature," which, I would argue, should be added to Pratt's discussion of "arts of the contact zone." I don't want to pose a strict cause-effect relationship—that one must have violent linguistic conflict and the accompanying pain and suffering to produce the contact zone arts, as in a painful and bloody labor that results in the birth of a child. Pain sometimes, but not always, accompanies the creation of contact zone arts. The writing center then is not only a site for the culture wars, but a site for the creation of contact literatures that result from languages and cultures in touch.

Contact Literature

Contact literature is characterized by nativization of a non-native discourse, for example, varieties of world English such as Kachru's East Indian English and Achebe's Nigerian English—the language of the colonizer bearing the cultural stamp and personality of the colonized. Nativized content, organization, and style are also features of one of the arts of the contact zone that Pratt

highlights—the "autoethnographic text," which should be included as a genre of contact literature. In this genre, second dialect or second-language-influenced forms of the dominant power language are used to define or redefine one's identity, to describe one's culture for oneself and members of the dominant culture who may hold simplistic views of it. Autoethnographic texts, says Pratt, are those "in which people undertake to de-

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"Writing center talk sometimes has a kitchen English rather than an academic English flavor—thus, its borderlands nature."

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scribe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (35). Such texts are quite common in the writing center, especially centers in which students do a lot of writing, sometimes in response to the center's own assignments. For example, in response to an assignment to tell about a time when students suffered an injustice, African American male students in our Writing Lab and writing courses have told of their experiences with police brutality, using a borderland register that is not street English, but is not college sociologese either. For their lab and rhetoric teachers of the dominant culture, they define themselves as people who experience fear, instead of those who inspire fear in others, their common stereotypical image in the dominant society, whether they are on the football field or on the streets.

In the following excerpt written in response to a lab assignment "A Place Called Home" and then "published" in *Voices*, the lab newsletter, an African American student engages with common representations of Africa and of "home."
> "There is no place like home."
> That is a saying that I have come to believe, for ironically, there is no place like a home that you've never been to. I've traveled to a lot of places in this country, but there is one place on this earth that

I have not been yet. I carry it within me. I desperately long for it—HOME.

When I say "HOME," I'm not referring to my home in Davenport; in fact, I'm not referring to any place in America. The home I'm referring to is my spiritual home—the home of my ancestors. The home of mine is across the Atlantic. The name of my ancestors gave to this home was ALKEBU-LAN. To the rest of the world, it's simply known as AFRICA.

I feel the need to go to Africa because I seek the knowledge of myself. I want to know how my ancestors lived and how they continue to live.

I did not always have such a desire to go to Africa; in fact, that was the last place on earth I would want to go, for I was taught that there was nothing there but a bunch of jungles and cannibalistic savages. I hated Africa. At that time of my life, as a mental slave, I would fight in an instant if I were called an African.

I reflected on why I had that attitude towards Africa and came to the understanding that the white man had taught the Black man—embedded within the Black mind here in America—the negativities of Africa. We as Black people have been systematically brainwashed into hating Africa and in the process we ended up hating ourselves. One cannot hate the roots of the tree and not hate the entire tree itself.

Because the student has redefined in writing the concepts of "home" and Africa for himself and his more "mainstream" tutor, this piece can be read as an autoethnographic text created in the writing center as contact zone.

Assignments such as Lou Kelly's "Where do you come from?" or "Special Place," in which students are asked by their tutor to describe in detail the physical and cultural properties of their hometown or a meaningful place, often result in contact literature, especially when the writers are ESL/international students who are themselves in a borderland state—as Anzaldúa says, straddling two cultures and languages. The content of their writing is almost wholly related to the native culture, but their language (English) belongs mostly to the new culture, except for nativized interlanguage syntax and lexical items (Selinker) that are either impossible to translate or that the writer would rather not translate to avoid distorting her meaning ("translator, traitor," as the Italian proverb goes). Or the writer consciously refuses to translate in order to teach those expressions to her writing center tutor. The resulting piece of writing is often self and cultural definition for the enlightenment of the tutor in particular and representatives of the dominant culture in general, again, the autoethnographic text. Many pieces collected in the lab newsletter, *Voices*, are examples of contact literature. In the following *Voices* essay called "Night Market," a Chinese student engages the representations Americans have of foreigners eating strange meats such as snake. She points out how eating steak is equally exotic and bloody to people from Taiwan.

Every time I stay up all night, I miss my hometown, Taipei. It's hard to Americans to relate to my feelings because I never see a night market here. Night market, as the word directs, is a market only held at night. Taiwan's climate is warm all year round, so some people hold the market at night to entertain those day-working people. At the night market, you can buy real bargains, taste delicious food, and even watch free shows. Ever eat snakes or drink snake blood? Try it at the night market and the

merchant will show you how "fresh" the snake meat is because he will kill the snake and take off the snake skin before you. I know this surprises Americans, but the first time I tried rare steak, I was also shocked by the bloody meat.

Every time I stayed up to study, I would take a break to the night market, enjoy the joyful air there and have some midnight snacks (not snake, I promise). When I came to the States, you know how disappointed I was because there is no place to go at night.

Another form of contact literature is the inadvertent ESL poetry of unique and surprising nativized phrasings that result from interlanguage processes (Severino, "Inadvertently"). Forms of accidental or "found" poetic language can result from mistakenly adding extra word endings or from combining two words or meanings. An example of an extra suffix is by an Asian student describing how she misses her husband: "The difficulty is that every time I feel upset or frustrated here, I cannot get his timely comfortness."

Another Asian student conflates the adjective "alarming" (threatening) with the sounding of an alarm clock: "When I was waken up by the alarming of the clock, I thought 'How can time pass so fast?' " Both of these constructions are "mistakes" that evoke poetic effects of sound, rhythm, and multiple meaning.

When writers purposely use poetic forms, organizational patterns, and other rhetorical features from their native culture and language to write in English, for example, the indirect peeling-the-onion-form that Fan Shen describes as a way to introduce a topic (stating the "conditions of composition" first) or the proverbs and sayings more common in Chinese than in U.S. expository prose, the hybrid text that results is also an art of the contact zone—native rhetoric in the host

culture's language, in this case, Chinese English rather than Kachru's Indian English or Achebe's Nigerian English. This process of rhetorical nativization can be considered a linguistic attempt to balance the "asymmetrical power relations" to which Pratt refers, the situation of ESL students in the host country. In our lab (which we still call "lab" because we consider it a place for these experiments in culture and language hybridity; see Severino, "Doodles"), we even occasionally have students write in their native language. For example, last November before Thanksgiving break, lab teacher Patricia Coy had her Chinese-speaking student familiar with Thanksgiving rituals write in Chinese to her other Chinese-speaking lab student who was curious about pilgrims and turkeys informing him about these exotic U.S. cultural practices. The result was a kind of "inverse" autoethnographic text—native (Chinese) code and non-native (U.S.) cultural content: pilgrims and turkeys.

Contact Dialects

The oral arts of the writing center as contact zone are as important as the written ones. Writing center talk—informal talk about writing—often happens in a borderland dialect, on the border of orality and literacy, what Judith Langer refers to as "literate talk," or what James Cummins would place in between BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills) and CALP (cognitive academic linguistic proficiency). In other words, as all writing teachers and tutors already know intuitively, basic interpersonal communication about texts and ideas is not very basic at all, especially if the text and the conversation are in the student's second language.

Although it is intellectually rigorous, writing center talk sometimes has a kitchen English rather than an academic English flavor—thus, its borderland nature. Transcriptions of tutorials are full of "yeah," "you know," "uh huh," "for sures," and tutor-comments such as

"That's a whole nother research paper." In the support program in Chicago where I tutored, we dropped the 'ng' at the ends of some words, influenced by our students' dialects: "How's it goin'? "I'm runnin' late." However, we would not substitute 'n' for 'ng' on words that denoted academic activities, i.e. "I see you've been studying hard and reading carefully." When we listen to ourselves, we become aware of the Rocky-Balboaesque style some of us use. About a student's options for revision, we might inquire: "So what dya wanna do with this supporting stuff here? Ya wanna cut it, move it, or what?" However, as Ilona Leki warns us, an informal register can confuse international students who learned a more formal style with a Latinate rather than an Anglo/Saxon based vocabulary in their native countries.

Our tutoring "dialect" has features of the American students' language, but it is not the same as the students' language. It's a borderland register, a contact dialect. Otherwise, in tutoring younger students, we would use the youth expressions "awesome," "cool," "like," and "you know" a lot more than we do. For example, we would suggest: "Like your paper would be, like, really awesome, you know, if you, like, stuck in some cool quotes from some famous dudes." Writing center lore is also created and exchanged via informal language. Tutors speak of Muriel Harris' "assignments from hell" and of "dead essays," papers that teachers have given a final grade and returned to the student without the chance to revise. However, even though the features of tutor-talk are informal and take place in a kind of contact-dialect, the discourse's functions—to pose optional rhetorical operations and to discuss the complex ideas of the students' papers—are highly sophisticated, an example of what Judith Langer calls "literate thinking," as distinguished from literacy, the acts of reading and writing. "Literate thinkers," she says, "objectify subject matter, making it

opaque and malleable, thereby permitting self-conscious distinctions to be made between language structure, discourse, meanings, and interpretations" (3). These self-conscious distinctions can be made either in an informal or formal dialect. A formal dialect does not insure or guarantee literate thinking, and as Peter Elbow demonstrated, an academic dialect can mystify readers so that they are not even aware that literate thinking is missing.

To sum up, we need to guard against overanalogizing the colonial, oppositional, and violent aspects of the writing center as borderland and contact zone. If we avoid romanticizing our own institutional circumstances and thus distorting situations of more threatening, physical oppression and culture-clash, and if we emphasize the processes of creating arts of the contact zone, the borderland/contact zone metaphor can be a useful and productive heuristic for examining written and oral texts of the writing center as examples of contact literature and contact dialect.

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VOICES FROM THE NET

Swords might be safer: The question of pens in tutorials

When Jason Pierce began a note to WCenter (the electronic bulletin board for those interested in writing centers) recently disclaiming that what followed was, he knew, "a fairly simple question," we should have known complexity was lurking right around the corner, waiting to pounce. The simple question: "Should tutors bring pens to tutorial sessions?"

The issues associated with the question are perennial concerns of writing center people, issues of students' autonomy in their writing processes, of students' authority over and ownership of their work and the effect a mighty pen in the hands of a tutor can have on the complex relationship between writer, writing, and writing assistant.

Some participants were passionately opposed to pens-in-the-hands-of-tutors; some were passionately in favor. And some, as is often the case in these debates, admitted to uncertainty, to reconsideration of questions they had felt confident they knew the answers to. A good time was had by all.

Tue, 25 Oct 1994
Jason A. Pierce
(JPIERC41@MAINE.maine.edu)

I know it's a fairly simple question, but it's one that we at UMaine have been discussing quite a bit lately:

Should tutors bring pens to tutoring sessions?

Does anyone have specific policies? Here individual tutors decide for themselves what's best: some use pens, others do not. Is one way better than the other? Why?

Tue, 25 Oct
Sarah R.G. Kovensky
(KOVENSKYS@Citadel.edu)

We have pens and pencils for the writing consultants to use. We strongly discourage them from making marks ON the students' papers, however. We feel that students should feel like they have ownership of their papers.

Tue, 25 Oct
Jeanne H. Simpson (csjhs@eiu.edu)

What is the function of the pens? Used to mark on papers? Or used to create illustrations, examples, or even lend to student?

This is not a simple question at all. It gets immediately at the heart of the style of the tutorial and the relationship between tutor and student. Look at the possibilities that occur to me immediately: red pen? implies grading pen implies permanency, why not a pencil, with an eraser?

It is hard for me to imagine tutoring without having a writing implement at hand, but I also realize that what I do with that implement is very important. If I use it solely as a tool of my own, something to write down a sample sentence or to draw a pattern of organization or to write two homonyms, that's one thing. If I use it to mark on and somehow alter the student's writing, then I imply things about ownership of that text that may or may not be appropriate for a tutor.

Tue, 25 Oct
Stephen Newmann
(newmann@msmary.edu)

In our writing center some tutors use pens but others use pencils while still

others use a stylus and tattoo their remarks right onto the student. One way seems to work about as well as another here, but we find that we can actually charge for the tattoos which helps us to afford the huge party we throw for ourselves at the end of the year.

Wed, 26 Oct
Jason A. Pierce
(JPIERC41@MAINE.maine.edu)

I'm not sure there's much difference between a pen and a pencil when it comes to "psychological effect"—both leave marks, and though the latter may be erasable, that mark's existence, however temporary, is important to the issue of textual authority. As a reformed marker : -) I now see how my influence changed others' texts in ways those others very likely would not have changed them if left to their own devices.

Wed, 26 Oct
Sally Foster
(writsal@showme.missouri.edu)

A variation on the theme of "Do you write on student's papers?"

With access to printers providing free copies of their papers, several students we see have, on their own initiative, brought in two copies of their papers. They like having one in front of them and the other in the tutors' hands and frequently invite the tutors to make any kind of marks the tutors want to on their copy.

Whadya'll think of that as one of several possibilities? Way short of Steve Newmann's Tattoo Shoppe, but now that he has mentioned it, we're considering expanding our services.

Thu, 27 Oct
Steve Krause
(skrause@bgnet.bgsu.edu)

What are we afraid of here, people? Do pens (or the lack there of) automatically mean that a tutor will control the student's essay? In short, the issue is not about whether or not the tutor has a pen. Heck, it doesn't even matter what COLOR the pen is! The issue here is whether or not the tutor should write on a student's essay.

Thu, 27 Oct
Richard Long
(RLONG@ubvms.cc.buffalo.edu)

I'm with Steve on the pen issue. What's wrong with a pen at a tutoring session. Again we are assuming that . . . becoming an authoritative figure is dictatorial.

On the one hand we want to act as readers . . . yet we want to deny that aspect of readership by saying we should never put a pen in our hands, and I've always thought that good readers read with a pen in their hand. I say there's nothing wrong with taking a pen to a WC or to a writing conference, and that it's not necessarily a negative authoritative takeover if we put a pen on a writer's paper.

Fri, 28 Oct
Dave Healy
(healy001@maroon.tc.umn.edu)

This thread has been interesting for the way it has dramatized an ongoing tension in the writing center and, indeed, in the academy at large, i.e., our conflicted notions about intellectual property. Those folks who urge caution about writing on clients' texts seem concerned about the sin of appropriation. But that concern is founded on a conception of intellectual property and ownership that many writing center people have chafed at for a long time. In what sense does one "own" a text or the ideas expressed therein? It seems pretty clear from our discussion that we're not of one mind on these issues. Should we be?

Fri, 28 Oct
Bobbie Silk (bsilk@titan.iwu.edu)

The question of ownership of the text is important because it suggests a differing definition of what WRITING is. We can go really theoretical on this one and return to the discussion of whether or not ANY writing is "individual" or simply a product of overlapping discourses. However, from a purely practical standpoint, the writer's perception of ownership is profoundly important.

Fri, 28 Oct
Steve Krause
(skrause@bgnet.bgsu.edu)

Dave Healy raises a good point in terms of text ownership, which of course raises issues of seeing writing as a "social construct" and such. It seems reasonable to me to say that no one really comes up with anything "original" (if there is such a thing anymore) by themselves, but rather, a writer comes up with a text because of the interaction with others and such. However, that still means "action." means that a writer must take an initiative to jump into the social fray. When tutors (or teachers) take out a pen and say "here, do this," they are taking away the opportunity for action. In other words, just because we can't assign ownership of texts to specific individuals doesn't mean we should do anything to stop an individual's exploration to find a text. I'm a lot more comfortable giving what I think is an answer to a student's direct question than I am just giving an answer.

Sun, 30 Oct
Neal Lerner (nlerner@acs.bu.edu)

How many of you who are classroom writing teachers as well as WC folk write on your students' papers once they have been submitted for evaluation?

If you do, why isn't that the same struggle for ownership that the same practice in the WC seems to be? When we don't write on students' papers when we tutor, are we sending the message that tutors don't take any ownership of

the paper in deference to the authority of classroom teachers? I'm a bit confused on this whole issue, particularly since I'm a committed no-scribbler in the WC, but a constant-scribbler when I respond to students' writing in my comp classes. Are we perhaps cutting a bit too finely what the purpose of written response (as opposed to verbal response) might be?

Mon, 31 Oct
Eric Crump
(wleric@showme.missouri.edu)

Considering the power residing in each molecule of ink that splashes from a teacher's pen (power that's driven by the engine of grades), it might actually be *more* appropriate for tutors to write on papers (because the power discrepancy is *much* less severe, allowing for the possibility of productive collaboration) and *less* appropriate for teacher/evaluators (who inevitably, however kind and nurturing) *wham* students with their comments. Teachers, I think, sometimes forget that everything they say or write is Bigger and More Important to students than they may have intended. Wham. Whether complimentary or critical: wham!

Teachers, maybe, should put their pens away, and tutors, maybe, should begin happily and without guilt scribbling away!

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WCenter@unicorn.acs.ttu.edu is an electronic mailing list open to anyone who is interested in writing centers. It was started in March, 1991, by Lady Falls Brown and Ed Sears. Subscribers include students, staff, faculty, and administrators. To subscribe, send email to listproc@unicorn.acs.ttu.edu, leave the subject line blank, and in the first line of the note put: subscribe wcenter Yourfirstname Yourlastname.

Our readers comment. . . .

Like the writers we work with daily in our writing labs, authors of *Writing Lab Newsletter* articles may also welcome some positive feedback. Too often when authors enrich our professional lives by their writing, we forget this—as well as the need occasionally just to thank them. So, herewith, a public thanks from two appreciative readers to some recent authors and, by extension, a public note of appreciation to all the other writers whose work appears on these pages month after month and contributes to our understanding of the complexities of writing center theory and practice:

November's *Writing Lab Newsletter* is outstanding, with its update on LD information and its lengthy, complex discussion of accountability. I found Anne Mullin's "Improving Our Abilities" especially useful because she explains some reasons for the increase in the LD population in colleges, lists characteristics of students with learning disabilities, and surveys the pertinent resources in order to define a role for writing centers and the work the staffs most usefully can do with students with learning disabilities. Anne's research and the commitment of her stance are a model for the rest of us.

Your original idea of "Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing" was timely and important back in 1977, and it remains so in 1994.

Mary King
University of Akron

The Learning Disabilities issue of *WLN* came precisely at the right time in my course; we have been discussing written language disorder and had invited two speakers from the university's services for persons with special disabilities. The bibliography arrived exactly 'at the point of need.'

Carol Severino
University of Iowa

Writing Lab Newsletter index now available

An index to the *Writing Lab Newsletter* by topics and authors is now available, either on computer disk for use with some data sorting programs you may have (which means that you can sort and re-sort according to various topics) or in hard copy. The hard copy printout will have to be pre-sorted by us according to your preferred topics. Since the ordering procedure is thus a bit complicated (because we're trying to allow for a variety of options), those interested should send for an order form and read all about it. Please address your requests to Mary Jo Turley, *Writing Lab Newsletter* assistant, Department of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356 (phone: 317-494-7268; fax: 317-494-3780; e-mail: turleymj@sage.cc.purdue.edu).

TUTORS' COLUMN

Peer tutoring: A contact sport for the 90's

As the tutoring session ended, I handed Stephen his essay with the words, "Okay, run with it; you can do it!" He grinned at the encouragement, and it dawned on me that teaching and tutoring writing and learning to write is a team effort, similar in attitude and methodology to the sport of football. At first glance, the comparison may seem incongruous, but closer examination reveals very striking parallels. With the classroom instructor as "coach" and peer tutor "quarterbacking" in the writing lab, the student "players" train to reach their "goal"—effective communication through the writing process.

Just as the football coach recruits many players during the previous year, the initial contact for individualized instruction should be made before the "session" begins. Summer writing workshops can be made available for gearing up the player to participate in the practice sessions when the semester gets under way. Training and practice at this stage help the student gain that first goal, qualifying for the team.

Once the student writer becomes a writing lab "recruitee," the coach depends on the tutor/quarterback to call the plays on the "field" at the writing center. For new players, the first "huddle" in the lab can mean the difference between success and failure in the classroom. An attitude of affirmation and encouragement starts as soon as the player and quarterback head for the huddle. Eye contact is very important when beginning the relationship. The tutor must be welcoming, interested, sincere, and helpful. Once this rapport is established, eye contact continues throughout each session in order for the tutor to be assured that communication is clear. Repetition of the "calls" is sometimes necessary since missed signals result in fumbles and ball dropping.

Selection of plays involves careful planning by the coaches and quarterbacks, so they should be in frequent contact. The coach has an overview of which skills need developing in each player and communicates this to the quarterback. There is a need for sensitivity and perceptivity about whether or not to allow the "player" to run with the ball. A trial-and-error method for learning the necessary skills is to permit the student writer to fumble around guessing which way to go, but more often than not, this method leaves writers in a tangle of tacklers, a discouraging prospect. Specific training about exactly what to do helps the student writer maximize the coach's expert advice and properly prepares the student for the game. This training should include the basics—punctuation, spelling, grammar. Assume that somewhere along the line, the students missed out on these vital components of the writing process, or they wouldn't be needing the instructor and tutor at this stage of the game. Once the basics are understood, the student's passing game (overview of global issues) can be developed.

Other students run the ball well but need more practice in the passing game—creating ideas, organizing ideas, and learning how to develop the paragraph and essay. Each player's need is unique, and individualized training at the player's point of need is most effective: learning to catch an airborne ball thrown from behind is much harder if a student hasn't been trained how to hold the ball in the first place. As these skills are being honed, the coach, quarterback, and players all work together to ensure that the team wins the championship, i.e. success in the writing class required for graduation.

Student writers need to feel that the lab is available for reinforcement training or guidance in further development once the season is over. The development of writing skills is an ongoing process, and the availability of the lab for follow-up contacts enables writers to reach their goals, not only in the writing of developmental and required English class essays, but also in the earning of a diploma, the Superbowl of a student's career. The atmosphere of the lab and the attitude of the instructors across the disciplines play an important role in this regard. Instructors can communicate affirmatively about the lab's availability, and the tutor can provide a haven of helpfulness. When everyone works together as a team, student writers can become student successes.

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If Mohammed won't come to the mountain: Encouraging middle school students to use the writing center

It is said that there are three ways to get something done: (1) do it yourself, (2) hire someone to do it, or (3) forbid a middle school student to do it. When it came to encouraging more students to use the writing center, we were almost ready to resort to the third option.

Our writing center serves pre-school, elementary, and middle school students. We have always had successful experiences with younger children. However, it seemed that as students entered middle school—sixth through ninth grades—their visits to the center became less frequent. There is a saying that goes, "If Mohammed won't come to the mountain, then the mountain must go to Mohammed." Rather than forbidding students to come to the writing center, we determined to take the writing center to them by building four bridges:

The faculty bridge

As Malcolm Hayward wrote, "Building strong relationships between faculty and writing center staff will. . .depend upon the ongoing sharing of information" (9). We felt sure that better communication with faculty members would translate into more frequent use of the writing center by their students.

In Muriel Harris' source book, *Tutoring Writing*, Patricia Teal Bates, in her article, "The Public Relations Circle," suggested that writing centers keep faculty members informed about student progress via reports, folders, recommendations on individual students, newsletters and workshops. Along with implementing these suggestions, we appointed a member of our writing center staff to be a liaison to the middle school faculty. He attended all faculty meetings and made formal and informal contact with individual middle school teachers regularly.

The liaison encouraged teachers to offer extra credit to students who took their writing to the writing center. As faculty members became more supportive and involved, the writing center liaison wrote personal notes and letters of appreciation.

Along with improving communication, the liaison also attempted to strengthen the relationship between the writing center staff and the faculty. The liaison took interest in upcoming school events and offered help from the writing center even when there was no direct involvement with writing. For example, when middle school teachers were planning a field trip and decided to stop at a park for a picnic lunch, the writing center liaison volunteered to help organize games and activities for the students. This offer may not have had an immediate impact on student writing; however, it had a dramatic impact on the attitude of the faculty toward the writing center. Similar attempts to help faculty members followed throughout the year. The liaison enlisted writing center staff members to assist teachers with everything from potting plants to putting up displays of student work for parent-teacher conferences.

The writing process bridge

One major challenge we faced in our attempt to close the gap between middle school students and the writing center was an out-of-date writing curriculum. Some teachers did not view writing as a student-centered process. Instead, most of the writing required was expository writing based on a fill-in-the-blank formula approach. Students felt little need to conference with a tutor simply to complete their assigned work sheets.

We attempted to face this challenge by providing an update on more current writing practices for teachers and stu-

dents. The director of the writing center conducted several in-service sessions with faculty members to help them see the variety of writing possibilities that could be incorporated into their teaching. Several student-assemblies were scheduled in which writing was explained as a process, and a humorous skit dramatized the benefits of receiving help from writing center tutors.

The writing center liaison also arranged with teachers to present lessons in their classrooms, lessons which introduced students and teachers to news reporting, journaling, short story writing, memoirs, and poetry. We tried to create writing tasks that would involve students more directly in the writing process. In turn, we hoped this would create more of a need among students to visit the writing center.

The schedule bridge

Another challenge we faced in our middle school was a traditional and busy schedule over which we had no control. Students moved from subject to subject and period to period with little time allowed in the day for conferencing in the writing center. To meet this challenge, we opened the writing center during lunch hours and scheduled elective writing classes which middle school students could take in the writing center during regular hours. These semester-long classes met daily and counted in place of other elective classes. Enrollment in the writing classes was small, but participating students had a good experience.

The first semester class focused on personal narrative writing. Students kept daily journals with self-selected topics and took several field trips. From their journals and trips, students chose topics and developed their experiences into articles, stories and poems which were col-

lected in a class booklet. During the second semester, the class focused on science fiction and fantasy writing, and students were encouraged to enter the Young Authors contest. Those who did were invited to a special reception in their honor and given certificates of achievement, whether or not their work was selected to go on to the state contest.

Another way we attempted to work around the traditional schedule was through sponsoring special writing projects. The largest of these projects was just prior to parent-teacher conferences. The writing center arranged to take responsibility for teaching all the middle school students so the teachers could have the morning off to prepare for conferences. Needless to say, we didn't hear any complaints from the faculty.

Students were grouped with writing center tutors, and we walked to a nearby museum to view a display of photography by Brian Lanker. After seeing the exhibit, "I Dream A World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America," students returned to the school where they wrote their reactions to the photographs; others wrote their impressions of the women in the photographs. One student wrote, "I may not know a lot about the women who have influenced America, but I know about the women who have influenced me." He continued to write stories of his grandmother, mother and some of his elementary school teachers. Students ended the morning by reading their writing to each other and later, seemed pleased when the project was featured with a full-page spread in the local newspaper.

The student bridge

Stephen North wrote, "In our center we find it best to go directly to the students ourselves" (441). We attempted to do the same and extended frequent verbal invitations to students we knew well. More generally, we invited other students to the writing center during school announcements, with flyers, with posters, and during class presentation, and

we decorated the writing center in an attractive and inviting way. The tone was professional and appealing to middle school students.

We tried to motivate students by creating publishing opportunities. We helped with the school newspaper, compiled books of student work, and displayed student work on bulletin boards. Free verse poems, written by students in several classes, were mounted on colored construction paper and hung with Christmas ornament hooks on a tree branch we propped up in the library and called our "Poet-tree." In every publishing case, middle school students had the option of remaining anonymous. When displays were taken down, thank-you notes were attached to all the writing before being returned to the owner.

Early in the year, after several middle school students said they did not use the writing center more frequently because there were not enough good tutors, we conducted a study to determine what students meant by "good." Middle school students were interviewed. Results showed that students wanted more tutors who were interested in them as people and not in just their papers. They wanted tutors to be more caring and respectful—tutors who saw themselves more as coaches than critics. We trained tutors to try to meet these needs and provided several handouts reminding tutors of the importance of putting people before papers, addressing content before mechanics, respecting students, and involving them in the conference by using questions. Tutors were also reminded to encourage students by praising the strengths found in the writing.

Crossing the bridges

During the year, we scheduled times with teachers when we actually took writing center tutors into classrooms where teachers could use them to help in whatever way they wanted. Some tutors led discussions; others helped students with research projects; some monitored the room helping to edit papers when students called on them; and others as-

sisted students in typing final drafts on the computer. One teacher asked the tutors to develop a rubric-scale rating sheet that he could use to better evaluate student writing. Another teacher asked tutors to help students draw murals depicting the life of the Aztecs.

Along with going out to students and teachers, we also brought groups and classes to the writing center. We invited Connie Willis, an award-winning science fiction author, to speak to students in the writing center. We tried to make writing more of a social experience by inviting students from other local schools to join with our students in the writing center. Our goal was to help middle school students have positive experiences with and in the writing center. We hoped this would lower the anxiety level of some of the students and assure them that the writing center was a friendly, safe and exciting place to be.

Reflections

Our efforts at bridge building appear to have been successful. In reviewing writing center records at the end of the year, more middle school students visited this year than in the last several years combined. Of course this was due, in part, to the groups we brought in ourselves. However, records also showed that more students were beginning to come to the writing center completely on their own.

Still, there were some setbacks. Our efforts were exhausting, and it was difficult for writing center tutors and staff members to maintain enthusiasm and morale throughout the year. It is said that the upkeep of the Golden Gate Bridge is a continuous and demanding process. Those who paint that bridge begin repainting one end before they have finished painting at the other end. We found the same high maintenance requirements to be true of our bridges as well. As with the painters of the Golden Gate, few noticed or acknowledged our work. In one faculty meeting we were discouraged when it was proposed that the writing center be closed to free some funds for "more important things."

Despite opposition, there were small assurances throughout the year that our work was worthwhile. In October, one English teacher brought a big Halloween pumpkin to the writing center to say thank you to all the tutors. In December, a Japanese student wrote a touching story about how much she missed her grandmother who was still in Japan and dedicated the work to her writing center tutor. In February, we provided materials for students to make valentines. While most were made by younger children, some middle school students came in during lunch and created their valentine, also. The group wrote a humorous poem entitled "You Revised and Edited My Heart" to one of the writing center staff members and signed it, "From your secret admirers." In May, a written thank-you note came from a young man who had recently moved to the United States from the Middle East. When he arrived at our school he did not speak any English. The carefully written note said, "Thank you for help me so much in writing center. From, Mohammed."

We had taken the mountain to Mohammed—literally. And despite all the challenges and setbacks in building and maintaining our bridges, Mohammed and his classmates were finally finding their way to the writing center as well.

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Exorcising the ghosts of conferences yet to come

Some of my favorite stories are the ones we share about harrowing conferences, and talking about them helps us fear them less. We even structured this into our TA training by scheduling two "exorcism" classes. In the first, the TAs-to-be watch a videotape of experienced TAs handling various problem conferences. The students in the taped conferences are TAs playing the part of students they have themselves seen, so they really get into the roles. The problems range from the ridiculous, such as outlandish excuses for late work, to serious, such as claims of gender discrimination. We then discuss the viewers' response to the way the videotaped TA handled the situation and added other various ways to approach these problems. The first class then ends with each TA-to-be listing two problems he or she most fears.

In the second class, we do role playing, with an experienced TA in the role of student that presents the new TA with one of his or her most feared problems. The goal is not for the TA to find a solution or a way to prevent problems, but to face it, survive, and later laugh. That ritual seems to remove their anxiety, which then allows them to be more effective in handling whatever comes their way. We exorcise their fear, hence the nickname for this part of the course.

If you are interested in learning more about this course or are interested in purchasing a copy of the videotape, call me at 608-263-5088. The tape is available for the cost of reproduction, handling, and postage, which is currently $25 if shipped by regular mail, $30 if shipped via UPS.

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WRITING CENTER ETHICS

The three laws of tutorics

In the 1940's and 1950's, science fiction author Isaac Asimov wrote a series of short stories about artificial constructs he called "robots" (though we would probably call them "androids" today), human-appearing mechanisms with "positronic brains" that allowed them to think rationally and—to some degree—independently. Imprinted on each of these brains was a code of conduct, an elegant ethical system which eventually became known as "The Three Laws of Robotics," that regulated the most important aspects of human/robot interaction. The Three Laws were as follows:

1) A robot must not harm a human being or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm.
2) A robot must follow the orders given by a human being unless those orders would conflict with the First Law.
3) A robot must preserve his own existence unless this would conflict with the First or Second Laws.

This is a simple and wonderfully compact ethical system. It offers a rigid hierarchy of values and establishes a clear standard for judging the boundaries of socially-acceptable robotic behavior. Humans and their welfare are at the top of the scale, and robots are expected to protect humans, serve them, and then if circumstances permit, protect themselves. One might question—and Asimov did—the efficacy and morality of such an ethical system when applied to creatures that are themselves, at least in some sense, intelligent and self-aware, but the elegance and power of the system nevertheless had a profound impact on

an entire generation of science fiction writers. The "Three Laws of Robotics" almost immediately became a part of science fiction's cultural heritage, and the Laws have been referred to many times in a wide variety of television programs, Hollywood movies, and stories by other science fiction authors.

I review this information because I recently began to wonder if such an elegant, systematic, hierarchical code of ethics were possible for writing centers and writing center tutorials. Now before you all leap up as a body and shout, "Never! Never! Never!" hear me out. Granted, Asimov's Three Laws were a fictional device intended to apply to fictional entities in fictional circumstances, and as such they are unlikely to apply to the complex, interpersonal, contingent, highly-situated conversational dynamic of real writing conferences. As I've said before, I believe writing center ethics are deeply embedded in institutional and situational contexts, and as such they resist reduction to a simple set of principles or universal guidelines.

Still, I don't think this is the same thing as saying that there are no values that we, as a group, hold more or less in common. We all, for example, would probably agree that it goes against our principles to proofread student papers in conferences, correcting all the grammatical infelicities and polishing up the texts to conform with our own ideas of how the paper should be written. We would probably also concur that, for the most part, our instructional attention in conferences should focus on higher-order problems (organization, develop-

ment, focus, etc.) first, and then move to problems of grammar, mechanics, and syntax as the occasion warrants. These principles are not absolute, of course; I realize that many of you could imagine circumstances in which each of the "shared beliefs" I have just identified would be —and should be —discarded. But that does not, I think, deny their essential value and general utility. So, that said, let me offer —very provisionally — an Asimovian ethical framework for writing center conferences that I humbly call Pemberton's Three Laws of Tutorics:

1) A writing center consultant should teach students how to write and revise their own work, not do the writing or revising for them.
2) A writing center consultant should help students identify the most significant problems in their texts, so long as the help they provide does not violate the First Law.
3) A writing center consultant should follow a student's agenda for the writing conference, so long as that agenda does not violate the First or Second Laws.

This system, like Asimov's, establishes a clear hierarchy of values, though in this case the values are applicable to writing center consultants rather than to robots. (Yes, I know we all tend to feel like robots in the writing center from time to time, but bear with me.) The relative importance of each of these principles reflects my own construction of a writing center's mission, true, but it also provides some framework for how many

of us would respond to some common tutorial dilemmas and why I think those responses would be essentially ethical. If a student asked me to proofread his paper for him, for example, I would invoke the First Law and decline. If a student had both higher-order and lower-order problems in her text, then I would invoke the Second Law and spend most of the conference engaging matters of organization, development, and the like (while being careful not to violate the First Law and be too directive about changes I thought should be made). If a student began a conference asking for help with the grammar and spelling in his paper, and it became clear to me that his biggest problem in the text was the lack of a clear focus, then the strictures of the Second Law would supersede the Third, and I would try to direct the major part of the conference away from his sentence-level concerns.

The Three Laws are not perfect of course. Asimov's robot stories were largely based on situations where the Three Laws of Robotics came into conflict (such as what would happen if a robot knew that saving a particular human's life would, in turn, cause other humans to die), and I have no doubt that similar conundrums can be envisioned for the Three Laws of Tutorics I hypothesize above. But as expressions of a personal, ethical, writing center philosophy, I can't help but think that these Laws will help me —and perhaps others —to understand what ethical priorities are dominant and especially important in writing center conferences.

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"From invention to congratulations": The writing center as an example of the recursive process

Students and peer tutors gather together in the writing center at California State University San Bernardino to collaborate on practically every aspect of the writing process—from invention to congratulations, a collaboration that completes what Edward Rocklin calls the "convergence" of two realms—that of the "reader-text arc" with that of the "writer-text arc" (182): "The transformations of the two realms overlap in their focus on and reconception of the "text" as both deriving from and being the focus of a process" (182).

Rocklin's statement describes the making of a text as involving both the writer and the reader who mutually influence each other in a recursive process. This recursive process of text development is enacted in the writing center with students and peer tutors playing the parts of both reader and writer.

When students and peer tutors work together, thinking and talking about students' texts, there develops a "common mental activity" from which meaning is generated. From this activity, students learn to look at their texts from a reader's point of view. This, in turn, changes their relationship with their texts. Students begin to make the move from having only a superficial, or writer-based, involvement with text, to having a deeper, or reader-based, involvement with text. Furthermore, students learn to value their own writing as texts (rather than valuing only literary works as texts).

Peer tutors work together with students to gain a better understanding of their texts. From this understanding, students learn how to work within the "reader-writer circuit," developing and redeveloping their texts through vision and revision. They learn that their own texts are "produced in order to be read, to be rewritten, and hence to generate other texts" (Crowley 93). Students and tutors interact in discussions which allow students to access the recursive writing process. While this theory made sense to me when I took my tutoring course, it was not until I stepped back and began to observe tutoring sessions that I could articulate the theory in action. It is this series of observations that I think are worth sharing.

One of the first tutoring sessions I observed is a good example of the recursive process in action. The student, who was writing a proposal for a management class, asked the tutor if the first draft of her paper was "all right." The tutor read the paper out loud, involving both her and the student in the reader-arc of the circuit. Listening to the tutor read her paper, the student could respond to the paper as a reader, rather than as a writer, and thus developed a deeper relationship with her text. The tutor then, by asking pertinent questions, involved the student in a discussion that did not follow a linear progression, but rather circled, or spiraled, back and forth between all aspects of the writing process. This kind of recursive text involvement helped the student to discover for herself ways to revise her paper.

Another session I observed illustrates how the writing process starts before the first draft with the need for an idea. The student who came to this tutoring session did not have a paper—he came for help with invention. The tutor and the student worked together clustering ideas and

then grouping the results around a focus. This collaboration led the two to discussions of audience, thesis, transitions, topic sentences, introductions and conclusions. While the student came to this session for help with invention, he left with not only a tool (clustering) to help him with future papers, but also with concrete ideas to help him access the writing process. This tutoring session exemplifies recursivity by demonstrating how the writing process is interconnected (ideas generate form which, in turn, generates ideas).

In a third observation, I discovered that while revising a paper is always challenging, that challenge can change to fear when a writer does not know how to revise. When the student came to this session with her "informative paper" on a week-end at the Colorado River, she remarked that she thought her draft was "worthless." First the student read the paper aloud to the tutor. Then the tutor read each paragraph of the paper aloud to the student, asking the student to decide the main topic of each paragraph. The tutor then read each paragraph aloud again, this time asking the student to stop her when she heard something that did not correspond to the main idea. As the student began to respond to her text as a reader, she also began to organize her thoughts so that they would communicate to her reader(s) and she began to gain confidence. Her conversation with the tutor helped her to discover examples that she could use to make her paper stronger. The student left this session with some clear, practical and workable methods for revising her paper along with accessing the recursive process. By becoming involved with her text, both as a writer and as a reader, she could see where and how to revise her paper; rather than seeing her draft as worthless, she saw it as a work in progress.

A fourth student's sole purpose for coming to the writing center was "extra credit." The tutor acknowledged this

need sympathetically and then read the paper, a literary analysis for an English class, quickly to herself, commenting that she thought the paper was "really good." However, she asked whether the student might be confusing character with narration. As the student explained the main thrust of her paper, the tutor asked whether the student might be trying to say too much in her paper, so much that it moved her away from her main thrust. With these questions, the student became genuinely engaged in the conversation. She explained that she thought she had to get everything in her paper and this was why she was having problems. As they clarified the main thrust of the paper, they discovered how some of her ideas might fit into the conclusion. This is an example of how discussion (which invariably takes a recursive, rather than linear, direction) can help writers gain control over the writing process.

The recursive process could go on forever if one was not bound by a deadline, but deadlines do not necessarily end the recursive process, nor do they necessarily end the "writer-reader" involvement with text that is exemplified in the writing center. In a fifth observation, I watched a student and tutor confer over a paper that the two had worked together on for weeks. The paper had been returned to the student with an "A" grade. I thought it was interesting that after the two had congratulated each other on the grade, they both immediately started discussing things that they could have, and felt that they should have, done differently. This kind of involvement with text shows that this student had not only learned to value his own work both as a writer and as a reader, but he had also learned that the writing process can recur as often as the writer wishes—it never has a definitive ending. I do not know if this student will continue to revise this particular text; however, it seems likely that this kind of recursive thinking, or writing process, will continue as he

writes future texts.

Composition instructors usually are anxious to develop this kind of reader-based writing in their students. To this end, I observed a tutoring session in which the student had been asked to critique a fellow student's text. When the tutor asked the student how her peer had responded to her critique, she happily replied that her peer had responded with enthusiasm to some of her suggestions. As the two went on to discuss what other kinds of constructive suggestions the student could make concerning her peer's text, I could see that the student was really taking her responsibility seriously; she was actively entering the reader-arc of the writing circuit. She could see that her ideas were valuable to others and that her writing did not exist in a vacuum—it was part of a recursive process involving writing, reading, understanding, re-understanding, revising, and re-revising.

The recursive process helps student writers "to perceive writing as an activity that is. . .guided and sustained by prior texts" (Comley 99). They begin to see that their own texts are valuable in that they produce meaning through the process of writing. This process involves the convergence of "two realms"—that of writing and reading. And I believe that one way students can gain access to this writer-reader circuit of recursivity is through tutoring sessions in the writing center.

I mentioned earlier that the recursive process can go on forever. This is why I see the writing center as an example of the ultimate recursive process. Students from every corner of the university gather together daily in collaborative sessions so that they may discover more about writing. In all of the preceding discussions of tutoring sessions, I mentioned the idea of discovery—that is because discovery is at the heart of the recursive process. Discovery is a never-ending process—a process that is

alive and working every day in writing centers across the nation.

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