

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 19, Number 5

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

January, 1995

...FROM THE EDITOR...

The experience of making connections between separate conversations or readings is one we all have. You walk away from one conversation, join another, and immediately see connections to the previous conversation. This experience happened to me yet again as I placed and proofread the articles in this month's issue. In keeping with the new post-election spirit of accountability and spending reduction, Michael Pemberton challenges us to face charges that writing centers are unethical—and unnecessary. And among the charges he warns us to think about (yet again) are some faced daily in a writing center operating within an Honor Code, as Thomas Thompson shows us in his article about tutorial practices in The Citadel's writing center. Responses to other charges—that writing centers undermine the learning process—are offered in articles in this issue about the successes of the Cyberspace writing centers and co-authorship as a tutorial practice.

I hope you enjoy reading and seeing other threads of interconnection as well. (As for the charge that writing centers are unethical because Hillary Rodham Clinton worked in one, maybe one of us can hire Marilyn Quayle as a tutor?)

• Muriel Harris, editor

...INSIDE...

MOOving along the Information Superhighway: Writing Centers in Cyberspace

• Jennifer Jordan-Henley and Barry Maid 1

NWCA Meeting at NCTE

• Byron Stay 7

Writing Center Ethics: "Questioning Our Own Existence"

• Michael Pemberton 8

Conference Calendar 9

Tutors' Column: "Leggo My Ego"

• Matthew Babcock 10

Tutoring Students with Learning Disabilities: Working from Strengths

• Joanne Addison 12

"Yes, Sir!" "No, Sir!" "No Excuse, Sir!" Working with an Honor Code in a Military Setting

• Thomas C. Thompson 13

Co-authorship as a Tutoring Technique

• Denise M. Andersen 15

MOOving along the information superhighway: Writing centers in cyberspace

It has always seemed to us that all writing takes place in a kind of virtual reality involving one's vision, one's ideas, and one's voice. When viewed in this manner, creating a writing center in Cyberspace is not a particularly alien concept.

Like many writing instructors, we believe that while the ability to use one's imagination and to whittle words into distinct meanings has often been seen as either a gift or as something we hammer into students by rote repetition, it is neither. It is an unfolding process, highly personal in nature and bound closely to motivation and purpose. The process can be imaginative and free-flowing, or dull and restrictive. Success is up to both the instructor and the student. It is, however, the instructor's responsibility to discover methods of allowing a student the opportunity to flourish and make choices. And Cyberspace offers the instructor another method of tapping

the sometimes elusive reservoir of imagination and motivation.

Early this year, the two of us met in Cyberspace and realized that our schools and interests were a good match for creating a Cyberspace project. Barry, an associate professor at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock, had graduate students who needed teaching and consultation experience. Jennifer, as director of the writing center at the Oak Ridge branch of Roane State Community

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College in Tennessee, had undergraduate students who needed writing consultants, but no graduate students or even upper-division students to help. This article describes the pilot project of the Cyberspace Writing Center Consultation Project, which brings our students together using the Internet.

The Project

The idea is simple; the community college students at RSCC e-mail their class essays to graduate students at UALR. The graduate students give a written consultation, e-mailing the essays back to the community college students for revision. A meeting time is also set up for a one-on-one consultation at a Cyberspace writing center. At this writing center, the two students can meet with privacy and discuss the paper in more detail after the RSCC student has had a chance to look it over and formulate questions. While the idea is simple, we found the process complex. We had to learn rudimentary programming in order to build the Centers, write instructional handouts for our students, learn to post to gophers, and schedule two classes across time zones.

Background

We began our dabbling in Cyberspace almost simultaneously. Release time had given us both a semester to explore the Internet. On the electronic discussion group, WCenter, we became familiar with each other's names and philosophy through the list, finally meeting at one of the Tuesday Night Cafe discussions hosted on-line by Tari Fanderclai and Greg Sierling at MediaMOO. What interested us both then, and still does today, were the possibilities of Cyberspace, both for us and for our students. We wondered what this communication and on-line availability of research resources would do to education, to the individual, and to writing. As we noticed that our own method of dialogue began to change in subtle ways, we wondered in what way the Internet would strengthen or weaken writing style.

MediaMOO, where we began our learning process, is a computer space located at MIT that is available for people to meet and hold synchronous discussions. Similar spaces are used for our writing centers at other locations. A MOO is a Multi-user dimension (M), Object Oriented (OO), that is text based and allows for the manipulation of virtual objects. MediaMOO itself is composed almost exclusively of media and writing professionals.

But not all MOOs are so professional, and MUDs, in particular, have been the focus of debate, in part because they originated as little more than sophisticated Internet games and were often not viewed as a serious workplace. Computer-mediated communication takes place in a variety of locations and for a variety of reasons, including recreational ones far removed from an academic environment. We believe, however, that it is limiting to judge all computer environments in the same way. To use the argument that MUDs have been abused (or could be) as a justification for keeping students off the Internet is akin to telling them they cannot use a telephone because they might just make or be exposed to an obscene phone call. To create and use available technology to enhance the teaching environment is our purpose, and we feel that it is projects such as this that give students access into a technological world and help to define the medium as an acceptable alternative to traditional classroom teaching.

Possibilities and Rationale

Among the many arguments for using Cyberspace in classrooms are those of Tari Fanderclai of the University of Louisville, who uses MUDs primarily because they offer that alternative. "MUDs provide my students with contact with people from all over, bringing the viewpoints of other cultures and subcultures into our little world." Fanderclai states. "Students get to try on new ideas, new ways of being, new ways of interacting.

Combined with e-mail, MUDs let us collaborate with people we'd otherwise never even meet. . . . And MUDs disrupt the hierarchy of the traditional classroom, giving students more power and responsibility and a chance to learn to use it wisely in order to accomplish what we need to accomplish." These are some of the broader issues relating to teaching in Cyberspace. And it is worth noting that many of Fanderclai's arguments also pertain to the traditional writing center, which is based on the idea of collaboration, student responsibility, and the sharing of power.

But the rationale for the project extends further. We would add that students become more proficient with computers, software, and keyboarding, skills that will serve them well in the future. They become aware of the availability of instant communication and the professional and personal dangers inherent in such a medium. They expand their research possibilities and are given the opportunity to explore how they might use the Internet in their future employment. Students also learn other, not so obvious, communication strategies. They learn to write more quickly, to express themselves more clearly and concisely.

Narrative skill is also enhanced. Spending time at a MUD means not only listening to a conversation, but being within an unfolding story; by joining in, writers become part of the story. As Eric Crump remarks, "if we look at all of literature, including scholarly publication, as being one long, vast, intricate and diverse conversation, then the discussion on-line can be seen as part of the same discourse. The conversation is [simply] migrating to a new media."

For those students who also learn programming skill—how to build additional spaces to the MOO—their critical analysis skills improve. Students learn more about cause and effect and apply it to a textual environment—something that might not have ever have occurred to many of them, especially those who are not fluent in the areas of reading and

writing. And because an environment is created for them on-line, they can see the connection between a narrative description and how they envision the world around them.

We also expected drawbacks. Communicating so swiftly, as anyone who has used e-mail knows, creates a hotbed of typographical errors, not to mention poor phrasing, grammar, punctuation, and a tendency to say too quickly what it might have been wiser to give further thought. Additionally, some students are just not ready for Cyberspace, either because they lack keyboard experience, have never used a computer, or are tentative or frightened by the whole idea.

While working on this project we also discovered that a very different type of relationship is formed between colleagues than what we might have formed had we been down the hall from each other. Lack of body language and eye contact meant that we weren't always clear in our meanings to each other and often had to clarify our positions. When it came time to announce our project to our respective administrations, we realized that we had developed some trust between us, but that it wasn't as fully realized as it might have been had we actually known one another in person, and we certainly didn't transfer the trust to others who became involved at our respective schools. We also had to deal with differing levels of technical expertise at our schools and unforeseen Internet difficulties such as lag or inability to connect. We learned to have a backup ready.

Preplanning

We began by talking, but it wasn't long before we started teaching ourselves how to add our own spaces to MediaMOO. When we decided to begin building writing centers, we became more serious in this endeavor and started to avail ourselves of the tutorials and on-line assistance MediaMOO offered. Almost every day one of us would meet someone new, and we began to learn ex-

ponentially. We branched out to other MOOs, availed ourselves of their services, and then regrouped at MediaMOO to share what we learned. Once the project was a definite go, Barry wrote a proposal, in Microsoft Word, for the National Peer Tutoring Conference. Barry then pasted it from Word directly into MediaMOO where Jennifer read and edited it. We worked, in short, as if we were in the same room at the same time.

We realized early on that both sets of students would need very clear instructions and that we wanted the pilot project to be closely supervised so that we could receive useful and in-depth input from our students. We therefore limited the project to one introductory literature class and one graduate class.

Jennifer then wrote detailed instructions for using both e-mail and MUDs. The instructions cover the step-by-step procedures of logging on as well as how to talk, emote, whisper, and page. Additionally, she wrote consultation guidelines for Barry's graduate students telling them about RSCC and what her expectations were as an instructor. She wrote an evaluation form, a syllabus statement, a net etiquette guide and, to help others create such projects, a textual blueprint of our final writing center design with building hints. Together with a full description of the project and the conference proposal, Jennifer then put all of this information on the Roane State gopher so that anyone with Internet access can obtain it by typing gopher rscc.cc.tn.us. Again, all of the brainstorming, writing, and editing occurred on-line and through e-mail correspondence before it was actually placed on the gopher. In short, we did what we expected our students to do.

Concurrently, we began to build the writing centers themselves. There are several MOOs that accept students and are considered academic environments rather than recreational or professional ones. And these locales differ more than a casual observer might think. While some MOOs attempt to make the student

feel at home by offering a traditional environment complete with the long corridors and grassy knolls of a college campus, others choose a combination of maps and narrative and are more creative—allowing the students to keep one foot in the traditional environment while probing anything their imaginations can take in. Since we see Cyberspace as a place where students can escape the traditional classroom and find new ways of learning, we chose to build our centers at locales that were not laden with building codes and rules and that allowed flexibility and freedom. We sought balance.

As a matter of fact, we started out with only one rule that all readers of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* should be familiar with: any writing center we built had to be located near a body of water. One pleasant outcome of building in Cyberspace is that the builder/programmer has unlimited resources, complete autonomy, and almost full control of the setting, within the guidelines of the MOO. One of our Centers is actually constructed on an island in the middle of a river. Located at CollegeTownMOO in Storm Lake, Iowa, students log on, take the Underground Walkway to Prospero's Isle and step onto a woody island that is meant to be a retreat for writers. The island offers trails, a swimming hole, cabins, and a graystone building which houses the writing center. Inside, the Center has an idea board for writing terms and help, a robot lab assistant that works cheerfully for 24 hours a day and can answer simple questions, and even an M&M dispenser. A hot-air balloon on the deck is geared toward curing writer's block. It can transport students to other areas of the MOO where they can disembark and poke around.

There are five main rooms where students can hold private writing consultations, in addition to the deck area, which overlooks the water. The two conference rooms, one formal and one informal, are named after our schools. The outdoor areas may also be used for consultations or group meetings. When students are in one room, they cannot hear

students in another room. Students can converse with one person, join a group, page each other from different places at the MOO, or even whisper to each other. We built a similar space on Daedalus-MOO, where one of the chief attractions for our students is the ability to log in and create a temporary 28-day character on the spot. This allows students to use their own names or nicknames instead of referring to each other as guests.

course called "Working with Writers." Originally designed as a teacher training course, Barry reconceived it to have students understand issues that concern all people who work with writers, not only in the classroom but in the workplace as well. The students who comprise these first Cybertutors are a diverse group. A few had experience using e-mail, but none had experienced synchronous communication on the Internet. Some had

Student Comments on the Project

"The help I received was not only useful on this specific paper, but with my overall writing abilities. It's one thing to sit in a class and be lectured on writing and to have papers corrected. This project gave writing a whole new twist. It's having my own personal tutor to help ME. My consultant gave me examples and useful techniques to use."

"I got immediate responses."

"E-mail communication was able to point out problems; on-line discussion was there to describe any problems."

"I had read the paper so much I had become numb to it. The e-mail communication helped me by opening the door to some improvements I could not see. Kind of like taking a step back and looking at the whole picture."

"It kept my attention. I felt that it made me more willing to do the revision."

"My consultant helped me with revising and with becoming more familiar with the computer."

"I enjoyed the challenge of not knowing what to expect."

"This will definitely benefit me. I feel this will be as necessary as a high school diploma or GED! I will include this experience on my résumé."

"This experience encouraged me to learn more about computers."

"I don't view it as a computer anymore. It's like a telephone, TV, VCR, etc. It's just another appliance but much, much more!"

The Students

Jennifer's community college students are enrolled in a Composition II course. Their primary focus is writing about literature. None of them had any Cyberspace experience before the project started and at least five of them had no computer experience at all. Barry's students are graduate students enrolled in a

worked in writing centers either as undergraduates or as graduate assistants. Others had years of experience as classroom teachers.

First Consultations

Our experience in Cyberspace taught us that there may always be unexpected technology problems. Yet despite tech-

nological snafus, we were sure things would work relatively smoothly. The plan was for the composition students to e-mail drafts of their essays to a special e-mail account. Once Barry received the essays, he would forward them to the Cybertutors' individual accounts. They could then read the essays and send them back to the writers. Thinking that quick responses were important, Barry told his students they would be expected to return the essays to RSCC within 24 hours.

Jennifer's students started mailing their essays around noon on Tuesday. Barry's students hung around the UALR writing center all afternoon. Through MOO conversations and phone calls, Barry knew the essays had been mailed; however, nothing showed up in the account. After arriving home, he again checked the account. Still no mail from Roane State. He checked again later, and then the mail started arriving. Unfortunately, the Internet connection had been down for several hours.

All of Jennifer's students were to have listed three possible MOO consultation times. Barry was then to assign the RSCC papers to UALR Cybertutors based on their being able to meet the conference times suggested by her students. He managed to get all the essays forwarded to his students by 9:00 p.m. CDT. A few of Barry's students managed to read the essays that evening. They had either stayed on campus late after an evening class and used one of the campus computer labs or managed to access their mail from home via modem. But most of Barry's students did not check their mail until some time Wednesday. Then they assumed they had 24 hours from the time they first received the essay, not from the time it had been sent. In fact, some of them first received the essay almost 24 hours after it was initially sent.

After having clearly gone over the instructions with his students and handing them the procedures in writing, Barry was fairly confident that his graduate students would be able to follow through. The first response, by

Cybertutor Joel, had both of us smiling. Joel had not only followed instructions to the letter, his comments about the paper were most insightful. We started to feel that things were under control. Then amid the first flush of success, we began to see problems. First of all, we discovered that Jennifer's students were waiting for the responses beyond the 24-hour limit. Then the RSCC students started getting e-mail from Cybertutors which were only confirmations of MOO consultations instead of being full comments about the papers. Then some comments started coming through that were woefully inadequate. And some comments, because of incorrect use of the communication software's margins, were unintelligible. Barry started to do some checking with his students, but his first task was to find them.

Time became a major issue. Jennifer's students needed responses because their lives would take them off-campus where they would not have access to their e-mail accounts. Barry managed to track his Cybertutors down and discovered part of what was going on. While some of them were oblivious to the problem with the timing, others had taken it upon themselves to e-mail the RSCC students to confirm a MOO consultation and let them know they would be sending comments later. That explained some of the deviations from our original procedures. However, some of Barry's students simply did not follow instructions.

Nonetheless, we prepared for the first on-line conference, which occurred on Thursday, between Joel, at UALR, and Danielle, at RSCC. The two of them seemed to adapt very nicely to the MOO environment. They had such a good time that they decided to meet for further work on the paper the next day. Interestingly enough, Joel and Danielle would meet a total of six times for almost six hours on this first round of conferencing. As the conferences continued, we had a few more high points as well as some more problems, but the majority were ironed out and the second round of conferencing went far more smoothly.

The Results

Despite some initial problems, the student evaluations from the first round of conferences were overwhelmingly enthusiastic. The students were more motivated and had fun. We often overheard laughter from our offices. Additionally, Jennifer's sense is that she saw significantly more interest in revision on the part of her students. She is convinced that the greater revision helped the quality of her students' work. As might be expected, the revised papers were better than the initial drafts, but what we did not expect is that the actual physical process of using Cyberspace seemed to emphasize the student's conception of writing as a process.

The real questions we were looking at concerned the technology. Does it work? Is there a payoff? What kinds of problems would we see arise when our students joined us in Cyberspace? We're beginning to have answers. Yes, it works. Yes, we think there is a payoff. As for the problems, we now think we have a much clearer idea of student issues in Cyberspace.

Student Issues

Different people respond and adapt to Cyberspace in different ways. It is a new environment for almost everyone. We had been regularly participating in synchronous conversations in Cyberspace for almost nine months. For all our students it was a new experience. Barry managed to introduce his students to MOOs all at once. By reserving a university computer lab, he was able to get everyone on a MOO and observe and lead them through their first Cyberspace experience. He was also able to get a fairly good sense of which of his students were adapting most quickly to the new virtual environment.

Jennifer, on the other hand, was at that time working on only two computers, a problem that has since been rectified in her Center, largely due to the success of this project and new labs being installed elsewhere on campus. It is much easier

to teach students how to MOO when they can talk to each other on-line, but if they cannot, the work can be accomplished through one-on-one attention.

A handful of Barry's students took to Cyberspace like they were born to be virtual. However, some continue to be uncomfortable in virtual environments. The level of comfort, perhaps even more than the level of technical expertise, seems to be of primary importance in the virtual tutorial experience. We were able to tell by reviewing the logs of the conferences that those conferences that seemed to be most successful were the ones where the tutor took the lead in making the RSCC student comfortable.

In many respects this is no different than what we see happen every day in real life writing centers. As students walk into a writing center the first time, they are often nervous, hesitant, and don't know what to expect. It's crucial that real life writing center staff do their best to make the new students feel at ease. As a result, writing center tutors are trained to make new students feel at ease. The best real-life tutors are the ones who ease into their conferences after making the student feel comfortable.

Aware of this, we both counseled the graduate students to take the lead at providing a comfortable feeling, and we pointed out to them that the programmed virtual objects located in the Cyberspace writing centers are themselves designed to make people feel at ease. Some of the students created this comfort in a variety of inventive ways. One provided virtual fried chicken. Another made good use of the coffee pot on DaedalusMOO. Still another was so good at just putting the student at ease that it seemed as though both soon become unaware that they were working in Cyberspace and not sitting and talking across a table in a real-life writing center.

Unfortunately, some of the Cybertutors quickly volunteered their own discomfort and lack of experience in Cyberspace. While they probably did so

to engender a feeling of empathy with the RSCC student, the result was just the opposite. Graduate students who admitted to feeling uncomfortable in Cyberspace seemed to spawn the same feelings in the students they were working with—not a good way to start a conference. Indeed, those conferences where the tutor admitted to not being knowledgeable did not appear to be productive.

Yet another necessity at making the students comfortable were the real-life writing center tutors at RSCC. These tutors sat beside RSCC students until they had logged in and learned how to talk and emot. They then quietly drifted away, although they stayed within earshot in case they were needed.

One of the most interesting observations about the first round of conferences was the way time became a factor. Perhaps we should have been more conscious of it. We have, after all, spent countless hours in Cyberspace ourselves. Most conferences, even the ones that didn't go as well as planned, lasted at least one hour. However, the students who had good conferences didn't seem satisfied with just a one-hour session. We later discovered that several of the pairs had made their own arrangements to meet for a second or third conference, or, as in Joel and Danielle's case, a sixth. The fact that freshman composition students at a community college showed enough interest that they were willing to spend extra time conferencing about their papers is a compelling indication that Cyberspace tutoring is a viable option to understaffed writing centers that have an Internet connection.

The Future

Several conclusions become clear now that we have actually had students tutor on-line. The first is that all the basic guidelines for peer tutoring experiences hold, and, perhaps, may even be more important in Cyberspace. No matter who they are, Cybertutors need to be supervised. Barry's tutors came to the project with a wide range of experiences. We found that with one notable excep-

tion, the tutors with writing center experience seemed to work better.

As in a real-life writing center, it is also helpful to have instructors' assignments available, and even better if their expectations are noted. Instructors should also be flexible about due dates. Since the technology is new, we need to make sure students are comfortable with it. We discovered that whenever there was a problem, it seemed easy to blame it on the technology. As a result, the technology was often used as an excuse by some of the Cybertutors who gave less than adequate responses to the student work. In fact, our observation is that the technology works best when used by people who are comfortable in their task in a real-life setting.

Coda

While building and operating writing centers in Cyberspace was natural for us, we don't expect Virtual writing centers to replace the tried-and-true, old-fashioned kind. However, we do expect that as more writing center staff introduce students to Cyberspace, more students will have the opportunity to receive writing consultations and sound writing center theory and practice will become even more important.

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National Writing Centers Association Meeting at NCTE

At the meeting of the National Writing Centers Association at NCTE, in November, in Orlando, the executive committee created an official bond between NWCA and the National Writing Centers Conference. Second, it endorsed a steering committee for the upcoming conference comprised of the NWCA executive board, the conference chair, and five representatives from the Midwest Writing Centers Association, including a high school representative.

A Provisional Committee for Conference Planning (made up of the current executive board) was created and charged with soliciting proposals for a third NWCA conference. This proposal will be discussed at the board meeting at CCCC in Washington D. C. in March. The board committed \$500 toward scholarships for up to 12 students attending the conference in St. Louis. The mechanics of this will be worked out by the conference steering committee.

Two proposals are currently being developed to be presented at the CCCC meeting: Al DeCiccio is working on a revision of the NWCA by-laws. Specifically, he's looking at ways to establish a permanent conference-planning committee and at a permanent policy for holding elections for executive office (i.e. elections for secretary and 2nd VP). Barry Maid is also working on a proposal to establish a mentoring program for NWCA. Both of these proposals will be circulated in advance of the Washington D.C. meeting. Contact Barry or Al if you have any suggestions.

Also, three people have been nominated for 2nd VP: Lady Falls Brown, Al DeCiccio, and Joan Mullin. Executive Board members will be receiving ballots within the next week or so.

The *Writing Center Journal* and *Writing Lab Newsletter* are both very healthy, and both have a backlog of

some very fine articles coming in the near future.

The pre-conference workshop, "What is a Writing Center? Models for the 90's," drew about 65 participants, about 80% of whom came from high schools. They listened to writing center models described by Pam Farrell, Betty Beck, Pat Stoddart, Lou Marchesano, Martha Marinara, and Helon Raines before creating their own writing center models with their favorite presenter. I walked away from this session in awe of the sophisticated computer-based writing centers in some of our best high schools.

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Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition

Call for Proposals
 July 12-15, 1995
 State College, PA
 Plenary speakers: Sharon Crowley, Jacqueline Jones Royster, James Boyd White

We invite scholars, researchers, and teachers of rhetoric and writing to propose papers, demonstrations, panels, or workshops on any current topic in rhetoric and composition. One-page proposals will be accepted through April 7, 1995. To receive conference information, submit a proposal, or volunteer to chair a session, contact: Don H. Bialostosky, Dept. of English, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802 (e-mail: alg5@psuvm.psu.edu)

Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar

Call for Papers
 July 28-29, 1995
 Williamsport, PA
 "Explicit Teaching about Language Structures"

Papers about teaching and/or research related to grammar in the schools are welcome. Presentations are twenty minutes with ten minutes for discussion. Send a 20-25 word summary to Ed Vavra, DIF #112, Pennsylvania College of Technology, One College Drive, Williamsport, PA 17701. (717-326-3761, ext. 7736; fax: 717-327-4503) Deadline is May 1, 1995. The proceedings of Conferences one through four are currently available for \$7.50 each.

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Questioning Our Own Existence

Happy Newt Year!

As you are all no doubt aware, the United States Congress has a new face this year, a face that probably frightens as many people as it pleases, and I suspect it is safe to say that our country can expect to see a great many changes in the coming months as fifty years of New Deal reformism finds itself under concerted attack. Long standing government programs—social, educational, agricultural, economic, international, and domestic—will come under severe scrutiny when the new congress is sworn in, and many people will discover, to their surprise, that the “comfortable truths” they have long supported and believed in will no longer be quite so comfortable or stable. If we are to take House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s rhetoric at face value, politicians, programs, and pedagogues better be ready to protect their posteriors because a new cannon’s loose on Capitol Hill, and there’s no telling where it’s going to aim next.

Which brings me to writing centers. In the spirit of the new republicanism (for want of a better term), I think it’s time to take a hard look at what we do, why we do it, and how we can justify it to people who might be looking at us as expendable budget items in tough—and getting tougher—economic times. Let’s face it: writing centers are luxury items. High school, college, and university writing programs have existed, even flourished, without them, and they can easily do so again. When administrators are firmly told to “trim the educational fat,” to do more with less and still serve the same number of students, then writing centers could easily find themselves at the bottom of the money food chain. We may,

in fact, find that old attacks on our educational philosophies and instructional missions, attacks that have long lain dormant but have never completely faded from memory, will once again be resurrected and brought to bear against us. And these attacks will draw renewed strength and vigor from a political climate that seems to support current-traditional configurations of writing, literacy, and pedagogy.

We should all be concerned, and we should all be prepared for the assault.

The best way to prepare, I think, is to refamiliarize ourselves with our adversaries’ weapons; the arguments that are likely to be used against us, and the underlying theories of education and writing instruction that are likely to be offered in their place. It is my belief (probably no surprise to anyone) that many of these arguments and theoretical conflicts will take place on the battleground of ethics. In essence, our critics will say, as they have said often in the past, that writing centers are at heart unethical; they do more harm to students, to faculty, and to institutions than they do good. They are mushy, touchy-feely places which either provide inadequate help to students overall or provide unfair help to some students over others. Political exigencies aside, I think that people who work in writing centers must be prepared to confront these arguments directly and refute them whenever possible. Our country’s apparent shift to a more conservative ideology may be the spur which goads us to defend our own ethics in the short term, but in the long term I think it is important for all people who work in writing centers and think of them as important, effective, and ethical

sites for learning to be able to rationalize—for anybody at any time—the benefits of what we do.

So let me spell out for all of you the “arguments” you are likely to hear. If you’ve worked in a writing center for any length of time at all, you’ve probably heard several of these positions before. If you haven’t heard them yet, you’ll hear them eventually, and if you’ve heard them before, you’ll hear them again. Some of these arguments are completely absurd, and some of them are self-contradictory, but that’s never stopped people from believing them regardless.

Over my next several columns, I will address each of these arguments in turn and consider their merits (or lack of same). That said, here is my Top Ten list of reasons why writing centers are unethical:

- 10) Writing centers are unethical because the tutors who work there tell students how to write their papers.
- 9) Writing centers are unethical because the tutors who work there write the students’ papers for them.
- 8) Writing centers are unethical because they undermine academic systems that evaluate students on the basis of their individual achievements. Universities (colleges, high schools, etc.) have responsibilities to other institutions—graduate schools, law schools, employers—that expect grades to be accurate reflections of a

student's abilities, not the abilities of the tutor in the writing center.

- 7) Writing centers are unethical because they undermine instructors' goals. Teachers give writing assignments to evaluate individual student learning and progress. Assistance from a writing center tutor problematizes that kind of assessment. Where does the student's work stop and the tutor's work begin?
- 6) Writing centers are unethical because they short-circuit a student's learning process. Even if tutors don't write the students' papers for them, the help tutors provide gives students quick, easy answers to problems that the students should be solving themselves. If tutors point out problems with organization and development in papers, for example, and then make suggestions for how to "fix" them, students don't need to think about such matters themselves. Problem-solving of this sort is where true learning takes place, and tutors—under the guise of "help"—deny students this opportunity.
- 5) Writing centers are unethical because they provide help to some students and not to others. This gives an unfair advantage to the students who use the center.
- 4) Writing centers are unethical because the supposed "writing expertise" of tutors is a sham. Although tutors may have written a few decent papers themselves, the help they provide to other students is often no better than the kind of misguided "advice" we often see on critique sheets when we use peer review in our own classes.
- 3) Writing centers are unethical because they have little or no claim to the "disciplinary expertise" which is necessary to comment on writing in many upper and lower division classes. Writing people say that "form is inseparable from content." Well, if that's so, and if you don't know the content, then how can you say anything meaningful about the form?
- 2) Writing centers are unethical because they don't pay enough attention to the aspect of writing that most students have the most trouble with: grammar.
- 1) Writing centers are unethical because Hillary Rodham Clinton used to work in one, and if she was associated with them, then they must be horrible places.

Actually, I have no idea if our current First Lady used to work in a writing center, but I include this final point as a warning of sorts: there's no anticipating the completely irrational. Don't be surprised if someone, somewhere, thinks the writing center is unethical because it kills so many trees for its brochures and handouts. I'll trust each of you to handle such situations as they arise. For my own part, and for the purposes of this column, I'll focus on the arguments that I can address in a halfway reasonable fashion. Some loose cannons are more predictable than others. . . .

*Michael Pemberton
University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign, IL*

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations (WCAs)

- January 27: South Carolina WCA, in Greenville, SC
Contact: Jeannie Dobson, The Writing Center, Greenville Technical College, Box 5616, Greenville, SC 29606 (803-250-8575)
- March 4: New England WCA, 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 WCA, 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 WCA, 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 WCA, 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 WCA, 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).

TUTORS' COLUMN

Leggo My Ego

Yeah, I'm an RA. Woo. I floated out of spring quarter at Utah State University, supinely piloting cloud nine, looking forward to my summer job in Park City, Utah, and happily mulling over the thought that, come fall quarter, I would be a writing tutor, "Rhetoric Associate," or "RA" as they are dubbed at USU.

Back when I learned I had been accepted into the RA program at the end of spring quarter, a subtle psychological transmutation took root and bore fruit in me. Even as spring approached, I spent more time in the library. I studied in the reference section. Suddenly, Webster's would not suffice, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* became the only volume I would consult for my etymological needs. I considered wearing a tie to school. I could not get too many pencils or pens behind my ear. "Thus" and "therefore" buzzed in my speech like a plague of locusts. I even said "hence" one time in my Realistic Period of American Lit class. The change was one of epic proportions. I was overcome. Truly, I thought, because of my writing prowess, the omnipotent gods and goddesses of composition had tapped me out and catapulted me into the upper writing echelons by consecrating me a holy tutor. Hallelujah! Viva el tutoro! Over the summer, I was often caught up in manifold visions of myself, sprawled on a throne of beveled gold, casually munching on pretzels and Chex Party Mix, indiscriminately quaffing Snapple and Koala natural spring water drinks from crystalline carafes while servant men and woman clad in banana leaf loin-cloths made obeisance and fanned me with original folio versions of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and Rich-

ard Brome's *A Jovial Crew* and I, cackling my rapture, pinned endless stacks of bad term papers to dart boards with flying red pencils. *Ka-thunk, ka-thunk!*

However, as fall quarter rolled around and classes started, reality took hold. I realized I would soon be responsible for giving valid and helpful responses to student papers in personal conferences with those students. Was I ready? Was I really tutor material? Fraught with panic, I began to shuffle trivial scraps of writing folderol in my brain in the vain effort to bolster my self-confidence. Now it's "i" before "e" except after "c," isn't it? Don't ever end a sentence with a preposition, right? There's "a rat" in "separate." Or is it "desperate"? Wash your hands before you eat? Shall, will, should, would? How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? I was frustrated. I was going to need something, anything—a plan, a technique, a gimmick even—that would pass as a practical and revolutionary snippet of tutorial acumen and substantiate my license to respond to student papers.

And the revelation came. Two weeks into our fall RA seminar, I was rapping away with admirable alacrity at the keys of my computer terminal, responding to a sample of student writing from an archeology class that Dr. Kinkead, the director of our RA program, had submitted to us for practice when the muse of intellect blew its trumpet of sounding ingenuity in my ear. My coveted piece of tutoring genius came quite unsolicited. It had to do with a certain writing question I had been pondering several weeks prior to the commencement of my fall quarter

as an RA. (With an overabundance of forethought and academic zeal, I had been conjecturing, even before school started, about what I would do as a writing tutor). The question? What is the one element that is most successful in impeding the writing process? The answer? The ego. From my own school experience, I had observed how everyone hated the writing egotist: the writer who, with seeming authority, quite matter-of-factly declares to you in your utter inferiority all the "rules," the unbearable showoff who thickly slops his or her paper with solipsism, the error-hungry tutor who cuts up your paper and eats it for dinner, or the student who, as one of my RA colleagues said, claims the copyright to the "perfect paper." In short, I felt that a superfluity of ego, in both writer and tutor, had the potential to shoot down any writing session or conference in a spectacular ball of flame.

My solution to this inherent superflux of ego in the writing conference was to incorporate a certain language into the tutoring session—"Tutor Speak" I called it—wherein the RA or tutor referred to himself or herself as "the reader" and the author of the paper referred to herself or himself as "the writer." These more general and anonymous name tags were devised as substitutes for the more personal and egocentric "I," "you," and "me" that occur orally in any one-to-one writing conference. In my conferences, sentences like "What are you trying to say?" and "Your meaning isn't clear here" would be replaced by "What might the writer be trying to say here?" and "The writer's meaning isn't really clear in this paragraph." Instead of saying to a student writer, "I don't understand what

you are referring to in this sentence," adopting the ego-free Tutor Speak mode, I would say, "The reader might not understand what the writer is referring to in this sentence." It was brilliant. In addition to Tutor Speak, I drew up a list of oral prompts that would act as a precursor to my oral conferences. The prompts were in question format: What is the purpose of your assignment? Do you feel that you filled your professor's expectations of this assignment? Would you feel comfortable, just in this conference, referring to you as "writer" and me as "reader" to avoid any hurt feelings that could result from well-intended, heartfelt criticism about the writer's written work? What are your expectations of me as an RA? Armed with Tutor Speak and this list of oral prompts, I felt confident when I received my first batch of student papers and the conferences began.

My first conferences took place on the third floor of the main library in "The Fishbowl," a room sequestered off in one corner of the library where students gathered for emergency review groups and collaborative study. That day, "The Fishbowl" was a carnival. At one end of the long wooden tables near me, a biology group voiced their frustrations about the inhumane lab assignment they had been given. Their epithets colored the air with horrific images of flayed piglets, scalpels wet with blood, and beakers of formaldehyde as they covertly conspired to hang their bloodthirsty professor and his sub-human rabble of teaching assistants. Four blonde girls, all in denim cutoffs and rainbow baseball caps, played volleyball with a wad of notebook paper on the other side of the room. Two seats down from the volleyball game, a tan guy in a varsity jacket snored, face down, his head buried in the circle of his arm as it rested on the table. Discussions of soap opera plots and socio-historical research filled the air. Ideas were born. As I waited for my first writer to show up, I sat back and exulted inwardly. This was my kingdom. No ego could survive in this environment of overwhelming academic multiplicity. Happily, I envisioned my first tutoring

session consisting of a writer and myself, both sufficiently humble and objective, reviewing a paper and becoming equally uplifted, energized, and enlightened.

Suddenly, there she was—my first writer. She hobbled on crutches across the battlefield of "The Fishbowl" to my table where I had set the papers, a sign-up sheet, and a sign reading "The RA is in." She was short and had her platinum blond hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. Smiling nervously, she sat down opposite me.

"Hi Matt," she said, dropping her crutches on the floor. "I'm Rachel." "Surgery," she added, referring to her limp.

Ah, Rachel. Yes, Rachel. Let's begin, shall we? I reached for my manila folder of papers on which I had penciled my list of oral prompts. Wait until you get a load of Tutor Speak, Rachel. You'll flip your wig.

Poised and cool, I reached into my holster of tutoring preparation and fired the first prompt.

"Rachel, what is the purpose of your assignment?"

Rachel was very candid. She laughed a little.

"I don't know, see," she replied. "That's where I need your help. I wasn't really sure what the professor wanted."

Whoa! A misfire! A shot in the dark! My brain hiccuped. No, Rachel. You don't understand. You see, I'm not dealing in "help" here. I'm the "reader," and you are the "writer." If you just answer my list of oral prompts we can smoothly move into a review of your paper. Wait until we analyze. You'll love it.

Rachel continued.

"Yeah," she said. "he wasn't clear. So that's where I need help. I just kind of threw something together and hoped it was right. Was I close?"

"Uh, yeah," I mumbled. "Sure."

Help? Five minutes of my fifteen minute conference had already been squandered on idle chit-chat. I hadn't even gotten to the second question on my list of oral prompts about filling the professor's assignment. Rachel and I would never finish our conference in fifteen minutes at this rate. And what was her infernal fixation with my helping her, for crying in the night? I was a tutor, not Mother Theresa. This was going to take longer than I thought. I was afraid that soon a phalanx of bellicose student writers would be backing up outside the glass windows of "The Fishbowl," brandishing bricks and sticks, cursing my mother, and bellowing nasty oaths about dumb, slow tutors. My maiden voyage as a tutor was threatened by a storm.

So I panicked, and Rachel and I plunged in. Her paper was good, a paper in embryo, I felt, but good. She wrote about handicapped people and the insensitivity of American school systems toward the special needs of handicapped students. Rachel began her paper with historical references to ways that disabled people were treated in Biblical times and to Henry VII's coining of the term "handicapped" when he ruled that dis-

abled people could beg for monetary assistance by holding a cap in their hands. Quickly, Rachel and I discussed the organization of her paper. I suggested some alterations for clarity, and she responded. We created a cure for her chronic comma splices, dangling modifiers, and vague use of demonstrative pronouns. The noise in "The Fishbowl" had disappeared. Rachel and I, by necessity it seemed, had zoned out. We discussed the topic of her paper, her handicap, the

"I felt that a superfluity of ego, in both writer and tutor, had the potential to shoot down any writing session or conference in a spectacular ball of flame."

ambiguous nature of the writing assignment, the class, its various contradictory philosophies, her philosophies, and her hopes of doing well in the class. By the time our fifteen minutes elapsed, we had taken the initial steps toward improving her paper. Then Rachel thanked me, picked up her crutches, and left "The Fishbowl." And I, hands behind my head, propped my feet up on the table and exhaled. Once again, I was surrounded by the complex musical drone of biology, volleyball, and the hammer throw. Tutoring was a rush.

But then it hit me. What had happened to Tutor Speak? In the blitz of the conference, I had totally spaced my brilliant concept. What had happened to "the writer" and "the reader?" Plus, I realized, I hadn't even finished my list of oral prompts. Shoot. Next to me, the biology club was orally dissecting baby pigs and spider monkeys. On the far side of "The Fishbowl," the volleyball game had evolved into hockey. The snoring letterman had rolled over, revealing his red, damp face and a pool of saliva on the shiny Formica table surface. Margie had Dave's baby. Marx was right all along. And I had a brief moment in the interim period between writing conferences to think.

Then the door to "The Fishbowl" opened, and I saw my next writer coming over to the table. He had a smooth face and thin eyes, almost slits of black marble, that hid behind opaque glass lenses. He plopped his paper in front of me in what seemed an agonized spirit of surrender or appeal. He appeared to feel that the table was a sacrificial altar of pink alabaster, his paper was a pure, white virgin, and I was King Kong.

"Hi, Matt. My name's Shane," he said. His hand went to his forehead, smacking lightly. "And before you say anything, I already know what's wrong with my paper." I remember thinking he was probably right.

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Peer Tutor
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A reader responds. . . . Tutoring students with learning disabilities: Working from strengths

In the November 1994 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Anne Mullin and Tracey Baker discussed their experiences with learning disabled (LD) students as well as provided needed strategies for dealing with the continuing increase of LD students many of us are seeing in our writing centers. I would like to add to this conversation by stressing the importance of not falling into the trap of viewing our LD students as problems that need to be fixed.

While the rise in the number of LD students entering college is important and well overdue, learning disabled students are literally being thrown into a system that was not designed to account for the challenge of the diversity of their learning styles. The American educational system "works" on the large scale that it does because it expects everyone, more or less, to learn in the same ways and possess the same abilities as everyone else within a certain standard of deviation. Those who do not fit into this system are separated out and put in courses where they are supposed to learn how to get along "just like everybody else."

The problem is that LD students are not "just like everybody else" in some important ways and because of this they are often seen as "problems" within the system. And unfortunately, the increase in the number of LD students attending college is not leading to the expenditure of time and money training faculty and staff on how to teach this specific segment of our student population, but rather on developing new ways of making these students "just like everybody else."

Given the current situation, while we do need to find ways to teach our students to negotiate the educational system, we can try to do so in ways that attempt to subvert the systemic pressure to

"fix" these students. One way that those of us in writing centers can counter this movement is to view our LD students in terms of their strengths, instead of their weaknesses, and work from their strengths in helping them become better writers. In doing so, we need to take the time to find out what our LD students' strengths are and build upon them. For example, I currently have an LD student who is a computer whiz and whose tutorials can be extremely productive only if he is sitting in front of a computer due to the nature of his disability.

One of the easiest and sometimes most effective ways of teaching LD students is to ask them what has helped them most in the past when learning how to write (reading their own papers out loud? having someone else read their assignment to them? covering the paper so that only one sentence can be seen at a time?). In other words, what we need to do is listen to our LD students—listen to what makes them different, listen to what they need from us, and most importantly listen to what their strengths are instead of their weaknesses.

*Joanne Addison
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West Lafayette, IN*

Writing Centers Session at CCCC

At the Conference on College Composition and Communication, in Washington, D.C. (March 23-25, 1995), the National Writing Centers Association's Special Interest Session on Writing Centers is scheduled for March 24, from 6 to 7 p.m. The session title is "Writing Centers: The View from the Administration" and is chaired by Christina Murphy. On Saturday, March 25, from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., there will be a meeting of the NWCA executive board which is open to all who are interested in attending.

“Yes, sir!” “no, sir!” “no excuse, sir!”

Working with an honor code in a military setting

“A cadet does not lie, cheat, or steal, nor tolerate those who do.” So states the Honor Code at The Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina. The code itself is not unlike honor codes at other schools across the country, but the enforcement of the code is another matter: the cadets have a whole manual prescribing the rules and procedures for the cadet honor system, and a cadet can be expelled for an offense as simple as failing to report another cadet who has violated the code. (The Honor Court isn’t as ominous as Pat Conroy paints it in *The Lords of Discipline*, but someone unfamiliar with cadet life might find it unusually stern.) For example, the manual defines “cheating” as “[r]eceiving or giving aid on a test or examination,” then goes on to define “test or examination” as “any work performed for which a grade is received,” so any paper which would eventually receive a grade is off limits for outside aid. When I joined the faculty at The Citadel, I wondered how the Writing Center functioned in a setting with so much attention to the honor code. As I discovered from interviews with various members of the Writing Center staff, however, a well-trained tutoring staff can function without fear of transgressing even so strict a code as that in place at The Citadel.

The main reason for the lack of conflict is that the Writing Center philosophy precludes most potential conflicts. With respect to the issue of “receiving or giving aid”—which is what the Honor Manual expressly forbids—tutors try to avoid taking pen in hand when discussing a student paper. They may discuss content, and they may use the Socratic method to lead students to discover their own conclusions, but tutors are instructed not to tell students what a passage means or give students a particular word to complete a particular thought. If a student has a question about the mechanics of a sentence, the tutor writes out

a sentence that is similar in form, then explains the principle using the new sentence as an example; the student must then translate that principle to the sentence in his own paper. That way, the student focuses on learning the principle rather than on fixing the paper. “The Honor Code does not drive us,” notes Angela Williams, director of the Writing Center. “What drives us is our becoming professional tutors, conferees and collaborators to try to improve writing at whatever level [the student may need].”

The tutors agree. Brent, a cadet peer tutor, finds that the Honor code actually makes his job easier because it “fits in with our policy that we’re a tutoring service and not an answering service.” Especially for students who want help with a specific problem, he says, “it’s almost nice to have a barrier there, so you’re not in a position where they feel like you’re not telling them the answer.” That is, students know that nobody in the Writing Center is going to proofread, edit, or otherwise write or correct their papers. As Brent explains, “I think [the Honor Code] makes them put forth their best effort. Subconsciously they think to themselves, ‘Well, he’s not going to tell me the answer, so I’m going to have to come up with it myself.’”

Rob, another cadet, puts it this way: “Our general mission . . . steers us away from [conflicts with] the Honor Code.” When asked if he would change any of his tutoring practices if the Honor Code were not a factor, Rob replied, “I don’t think I’d do anything different, because the whole deal with proofreading and showing exactly where the errors are is not because of the Honor Code, it’s because of the whole tutor philosophy. . . . If you keep showing [students] what to do and where their errors are, it won’t help them any. It just goes against the whole philosophy we’re taught here.”

When working with students on particular problems, tutors use examples from the students’ previously written papers, or “dead” papers. This practice ensures that students work on mastering principles rather than fixing particular papers—which, of course, is the goal of instruction. Again, the Honor Code predisposes students to accept this practice as the norm, since neither the tutor nor the student wants to engage in any activity which might remotely be construed as “cheating” and could result in the student’s dismissal from school.

Victoria says her awareness of the Honor Code helps keep her more aware of what she is doing with students. Because she so often thinks “with a pencil in [her] hand,” she initially had trouble learning not to mark on student papers. For her, the Honor Code also helps reinforce the Writing Center philosophy: “I probably make [students] work more by having the Honor Code. If I didn’t have that, . . . I might tell them more where problems are, instead of making them figure it out—not meaning to, but I might do that more.”

Lynn, another graduate assistant, says that a few professors will tell their students explicitly not to get help from the Writing Center on particular papers, but that other professors will explicitly encourage students to get help. On the whole, however, she says that the Honor Code rarely affects her activities as a tutor. She prefers to begin with a “dead” paper as a diagnostic tool to help identify areas on which to focus. When looking at “live” papers (i.e., papers not yet graded), she uses questions that allow the students to identify their own goals, main ideas, or alternative ways of expressing their thoughts. She adds, however, that while her methods are consistent with the Honor Code, they are not dictated by it; she would work the same way at any other school.

The one area of writing in which Lynn does see the Honor Code having an effect that wouldn't show up at another school is in a concern with plagiarism: "They are so scared of plagiarizing that their citations and documentation are sometimes very awkward, and it doesn't make sense. . . . I think that's where they're really scared—especially freshmen." Again, however, her methods are not affected by the Honor Code; it's just that she spends more time explaining the difference between summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting than she otherwise might.

Pete, one of the professional tutors, also works as a tutor at another local college, and he previously worked in a writing center at a university in another state. He says that the Honor Code has little effect on his tutoring practices: "The boundaries that I have for tutoring tend to follow closely the boundaries of the Honor Code. I mean, I'm not interested in writing anybody's paper. . . . I don't operate terribly differently here because of the Honor Code. It doesn't change what I do. . . . I think the Writing Center monitors us pretty well in terms of what we're allowed to do for students."

Pete says that he hears more concern about the Honor Code from students than from professors: "Usually it will be first-year students, first-semester especially, and they're hyper-aware of the Honor Code. They'll say, 'Is it OK if we look at this paper?' . . . they're very careful about it. . . . At other schools I've dealt with more students who are willing to entertain the possibility that [I] would write their paper for them, and at The Citadel, that's not even something that the students would entertain."

Jenny, the Writing Center Coordinator, who taught high school English before coming to The Citadel, echoes the sentiments of the tutors: "I don't know that I have altered my teaching or tutoring style just because of the Honor Code here. I know that I typically would not give students information anyway—I wouldn't have done that as a teacher. I

would want them to find their own answers, so I don't give them information. I never proofread for them when I was a teacher."

In short, the Honor Code makes little difference in tutoring practices at the Writing Center at The Citadel, though it may influence the perceptions of students who use the services there. What matters most is not a concern for the Honor Code, but a concern for creating better student writers rather than better student papers. And that approach should work on *any* campus.

Thomas C. Thompson
The Citadel
Charleston, SC

Addendum on Learning Disabilities

Anne Mullin's article in the December 1994 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, on working with students with learning disabilities, was written before she learned about Landmark College or had the opportunity to attend one of its summer institutes. Her addendum reached the newsletter too late for inclusion in the article. Please add to the information about teaching/tutoring writers with learning disabilities the following entry:

Landmark College in Putney, Vermont, has an outstanding Associates Degree program for students with learning disabilities. Its faculty members have developed expertise in teaching writing, study skills and mathematics, which they share through workshops and intensive week-long summer institutes. For complete information, contact James Olivier, Director of Outreach Programs, Landmark College, RRI, Box 1000, Putney, VT 05346. Telephone: 802-387-4767; fax: 802-387-4779.

Community College Survey Being Conducted

For a variety of reasons, community college writing centers face many problems a university center does not. These problems influence strategic planning as well as day-to-day operations. We are conducting a survey similar to the Oklahoma State University survey compiled by Sharon Wright and published in the June 1994 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, only our survey is geared specifically to community colleges.

We have a 20-question survey which we will send via e-mail or snail mail to anyone interested in completing it, and we are asking that responses be sent to us by January 30. When the information is compiled, I will be glad to e-mail or snail mail the results to those who responded. All specific information regarding salaries, staff, or internal politics is confidential, or, you can leave a question unanswered. We hope that this survey will help us to justify what we consider some of our most basic writing center needs and that it will serve as a benchmark for future planning.

Please contact me for a copy of the survey questions.

Jennifer Jordan-Henley
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Co-authorship as a tutoring technique

The sun rose slowly, warming the cool, dark, blue sky. The beach became hot. The water was warm. The people started to swim.

Suddenly, the shriek of a lifeguard's whistle pierced the air. The lifeguard saw a shark in the water. Some ran out of the water, but the shark ate two or three people.

The water turned bright red. Some people on the beach screamed in horror while others ran, grabbing their children, and turning away from the horror of the moment.

The above paragraphs were written both by a student in a developmental writing course and by an experienced writer; and it illustrates how co-authorship can be used in a tutorial. I have written with developmental writing students and used the experience as an instructional approach at Brookdale Community College.

Background

Among Brookdale's developmental writing course offerings is a Writing Skills Lab Study. The student meets with the same learning assistant once a week for one hour. Each learning assistant is assigned one to three students to work exclusively with for a semester. We receive input from the recommending basic skills instructor, have access to the student's work from that basic skills class, and evaluate a student writing sample when planning a curriculum for the semester. Because it is a highly individualized program, we are constantly

altering our approaches and methods to accommodate the student's progress and current needs.

Recently, I have been interacting with my assigned students in a new way. We write together, collaborating by alternating contributions to the work in progress. My experiences with a variety of students embodying different needs are very productive as we generate more writing together than the student typically generates alone. The approach is also successful because it affords an opportunity to practice skills during the writing as well as afterward in revision.

What we do

I liken this approach to a freewriting exercise during which two people write a story. The story most lends itself to fiction because two individuals are creating it. For a non-fiction collaboration, the story would have to be either a shared experience or a response to an outside event. This could be an adaptation of my original approach but brings with it inherent restrictions in its factual basis. With stories, the freedoms from conventions in form and content seem to be characteristics of a method to which students are most receptive and which I encourage during the composing stage.

With little concern for grammar, spelling or sentence structure, I explain to the student, we will take turns writing, write as much or as little as we want, and stop wherever we want. "Would you like to start?" I ask. The answer is invariably "No," so I begin.

How we do it

My initial concern is to get something

moving, so I create at least a setting or character or both. For example, I begin, "Night fell cruelly, enveloping the city in an eerie hue. The air was heavy with fog and the humidity oppressive. Breathing was difficult." Now, at least, we have a place and ambiance. When I tire of writing or arrive at a place I think conducive to the student continuing, I stop and turn the pad toward her. The student reads, then writes in response to my contribution. "There was not one person in sight, not even a mugger or carjacker." Because we still have no character, I create one during my turn in order to get things moving. "Rachel's high heels tapped, tapped, tapped along the pavement as she hurried back to the safety of her apartment."

As we develop text, I have more opportunities to attempt to manipulate the flow by deliberately stopping in a place screaming for development or suspending a moment heavy with detail.

Case studies

Jane complains that writing is not "fun." She is a fairly capable writer but extremely sensitive to an instructor's comments and resistant to the revision process. The concept of writing "for fun" with little or no regard to mechanics appeals to her.

As we write and laugh, however, serious work is being accomplished. Though unaware of it, Jane is taking part in modeling by altering her style to more closely mimic mine. Early on, she notes differences in our vocabulary and styles, and I note deliberate attempts on her part to include detail and to expand her thoughts more than usual. My objective through modeling, is not to have the

student write like me, but for her to recognize and attempt a more sophisticated style.

Joe has a perceptual impairment and vivid imagination. His writing is extremely unfocused, undeveloped, and disorganized. I deliberately load my writing with heavy details and drag out the moments. I attempt to put the brakes on his thought process as he jumps from scene to scene or action to action. It is fairly successful.

One of my main objectives is to get some work generated and, of course, we do. Our interactions sustain his interest for the entire hour session. In spite of his chronically low energy level, he finds the short bursts of active participation to be stimulating, yet not tiring. He enjoys the process and is impressed by the length of our two-page piece because his essays generally run from one to three paragraphs.

Revision

After an hour session of writing together, I hand over our co-authored piece to the student. As homework, the assignment for the week is to complete, revise, proofread the work. Revision is encouraged wherever the student as editor feels necessary (even on my contributions). I suggest that the student be especially aware of transitions between our respective contributions.

Resistance to this revision stage is less marked than to the students' solo works. Perhaps they are not as tired of the piece or perhaps the thought of editing the "instructor's" work is appealing.

I use this approach toward the end of the semester as I feel a degree of comfort that is necessary. I also need a frame of reference (student generated work) in order to evaluate the success of the collaborative writing via comparison.

Benefits

Co-authorship in a tutorial setting is a great bonding experience, almost "intimate," bringing together, tightening the tutor/student relationship about as close as one would want. This "equalizing" is the most striking aspect of a tutor writing with a student but is also the undercurrent of all other benefits. With pressure to perform relaxed, students produce more writing than usual and are more receptive to the revision process. This approach is "fun," providing a change of pace and opportunity for modeling in a most subtle manner.

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