

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 19, Number 7

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

March, 1995

...FROM THE EDITOR...

Will you be attending the upcoming Conference on College Composition and Communication, in Washington, D.C.? Interested in trying to identify (and meet) other writing center folk? If so, Katie Fischer has convinced the John Deere Company to donate 75 pewter Model A John Deere tractor lapel pins, and she'll give them to whoever of us finds her at the 4C's. Katie says she'll be the one wearing the pewter tractor pin in her lapel. The only clue we have to her appearance is that she says, "I am not a big-boned blonde."

Whether or not you wear your John Deere tractor pin—and possibly another one being considered, "I'm (Writing) Centered"—the conference includes opportunities to attend numerous writing lab sessions, including the Special Interest Session, and the Executive Board Meeting of the National Writing Centers Association. Check your program book.

We look forward to hearing from conference goers who can share with newsletter readers what they heard, both at this national conference and at any of the many regional conferences being held this month. And don't forget to send your contributions to the Question Exchange (see page 10).

Muriel Harris, editor

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Into the fray: Ethnicity and tutor preparation

When we redesigned the tutor training course at Colorado College to include concepts of ethnic identity, we had compelling and concrete reasons to take on this project. For the past decade, Molly has wondered how a writing center can contribute to efforts to attract and retain students who come from under-represented backgrounds and ethnicities. Colorado College is a small, highly selective, liberal arts college on the edge of the Rockies. If our size, curriculum, cost, and location didn't pose enough challenges to creating and sustaining a diverse student body, the recent passage of a state constitutional amendment has. The amendment which supports discrimination against gays and lesbians has earned us the nickname "the hate state."

Two years ago, Molly and several tutors researched the relationship between minority students, their writing as perceived by faculty, and the Writing Center. We found that the college's good, white, liberal attempts to do something create confusion, denial, and covert racism. And at best, these efforts generate faint praise from minority students. We heard the confusion in comments such

as, "I am glad to be a tutor, but I know I was picked because I'm Hispanic." Denial surfaced in comments such as a faculty member's earnest remark, "I find no difference between minority students' writing and majority students'," while minority students are notably over-represented in reports of student writing problems. The covert racism showed up in the numbers—students with ethnic minority backgrounds regularly make up 50% of the students on academic probation and are twice as likely to

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Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is ten to fifteen double-spaced typed pages, three to five pages for reviews, and four pages for the Tutors' Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. If possible, please send a 3 and 1/4 in. disk with the file, along with the hard copy. Please enclose a self-addressed envelope with return postage not pasted to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 45 days prior to the month of issue (e.g. August 15 for October issue).

Please send articles, reviews, announcements, comments, queries, and yearly subscription payments to the editor.

attract a writing evaluation—good or bad. This discomfiting series of enlightenments made it clear; our present way of working with ethnic students and their writing wasn't helping them achieve at Colorado College.

Molly decided to see if changing the tutor training course to include concepts of ethnicity would have any effect on the way the students in the course eventually tutor. And if they did tutor differently, might the Writing Center become more effective in helping ethnic minorities. She used the ideas of James Banks as a guide for changing the course.

Banks, an African American educator, has written extensively on ethnic studies and on multiethnic curriculum reform. When he discusses the effective teacher in a multiethnic curriculum, he argues that, "The teacher is the most important variable. . . . His or her attitudes toward ethnic content and ethnic cultures are crucial" (501). Banks encourages teachers to examine their attitudes, citing research that concludes, "teachers' attitudes are revealed to students even when teachers are unaware of their negative feelings" (501). No matter what their ethnicity, teachers must work on their attitudes about ethnicity if they hope to become multiethnic educators (501).

Banks also offers a critique of the assimilationist assumptions that have informed ethnic studies. In their stead, he strongly encourages teachers to assume a multiethnic ideology in which events are understood in terms of how they are created by the many interrelated ethnicities in the U.S. (18). For example, we would come to see an event in terms of how it reflects Jewish and Hispanic culture as well as mainstream culture instead of trying to determine a Hispanic or Jewish understanding of that event (18).

Once teachers are clear about their attitudes toward ethnicity and what they think of minority education, Banks maintains that teachers must come to see ethnic studies as a process in educational reform—not finished by simply talking

about Afro-American culture or Navajo culture to our Afro-American or Navajo students and not simply requiring an additional component to our curriculum. Rather, teachers must continue the process of reforming education by seeking out novel ways of understanding so that teachers and students can acquire the skills, knowledge and preparation to conceptualize ethnic studies in every aspect of education (12).

A beginning point for a teacher to clarify attitudes about ethnicity is to understand his or her own ethnic identity. Banks posits a six-stage typology which emphasizes that ethnic identity is dynamic and that all of us are at some stage of an emerging ethnic identity (65-67). This typology became our central tool for redesigning the tutor training course. Here it is in a nutshell.

At Banks' first stage, people are prisoners of negative beliefs about their ethnicity. This stage, characterized by low self-esteem, is more likely to be experienced by members of ethnic groups who have been victimized. Anglo-Americans are not too likely to experience it.

Stage two, voluntary separatism, is characterized by a new excitement about ethnicity—a feeling that one's ethnic group is superior to other groups. Anglo-Americans in particular have inculcated this feeling of superiority. People at this stage are likely to reject assimilationists and outgroups and can be perceived as bigots and racists.

In stage three, people develop positive attitudes toward their ethnic group. They learn to accept themselves, thus learning to accept others. Those most likely to reach this stage have economic and psychological security and have had positive experiences with members of other ethnic groups.

Stage four is characterized by a healthy sense of ethnic identity and the skills needed to participate successfully in another's ethnic culture. At this stage,

people have a strong desire to function in two cultures. Note that non-whites are forced to be biethnic to some extent to achieve social and economic mobility. Anglo-Americans don't necessarily have to achieve stage four to succeed and thus have to work hard at this stage.

At stage five, people have clarified ethnic self-identities, positive attitudes toward other ethnic and racial groups, and are self-actualized. These people function, at least minimally at meaningful levels, within several ethnic environments. They are able to understand, appreciate and share the values, symbols and institutions of several cultures. At this level, people show a strong commitment to their own group, concern for other groups, and a strong commitment to the nation state and its idealized values—justice and dignity.

At stage six, people extend the qualities of stage five to other national cultures as well as ethnic cultures within their own nation state. These people are global citizens.

We knew that we weren't going to make global citizens of our students in just nine days. We didn't think we could move ourselves through all the stages, either. But if we could move toward gaining new understandings and new ways of talking about our own emerging ethnic identities, maybe we could create new ways of tutoring. Perhaps we could move closer to becoming effective multiethnic teachers, and maybe we would be better at helping minority and majority students achieve. We gave our first assignment a few weeks before the class began. We wanted to introduce the students to our agenda while getting an initial base reading on their levels of awareness. The assignment was a little vague so the students would have room to interpret it.

ASSIGNMENT #1:

As members of the global community and as teachers, we are called upon to examine our own ethnic awareness. One way to begin this

process is to come to terms with our own ethnicity. Please write a 3-5 page essay addressing how your ethnicity is revealed in the way you mark special occasions (birthdays, holidays, anniversaries). You will be asked to share your paper with other members of the class. We will use this assignment to get to know each other and to begin working with the writing of others.

The papers were thoughtful and well written. When the class gathered to discuss the assignment, the students said they appreciated the chance to examine who they are. Some said they had never thought of themselves as being ethnic. Others, who were more familiar with their own ethnicities, also saw the importance of the assignment but from a different perspective. These students believed that reminders of diversity were as valuable as the original awakening of ethnic awareness.

As teachers, we learned much from the way each student approached the assignment. One student framed his paper as a dialogue between a child and his grandmother. Another wrote a short story, describing how region, economic class, and even the time period were more important in determining his identity than racial ethnicity.

The first assignment went through a few revisions and was accessible to use in class for various writing games and tricks we wanted the tutors to learn. So the essays served many course goals.

The second major ethnic awareness assignment was a group problem solving session. We split the class into groups of three or four and gave each group a difficult tutoring scenario that involved ethnicity or identity. Each scenario was based on experiences that we had in our writing center. After the small group discussions, we reassembled as a group for an open discussion.

Assignments for Group Problem Solving:

1. A non-traditional student comes to you wanting to revise a rough draft for a "Sociology of the Family" course. The writer's thesis amounts to this: Gays and lesbians are sinful freaks of society and merit no respect, rights, or cultural recognition. Knowing that the professor is a radical feminist lesbian, how will you proceed? (scenario provided by Pete, a Polish, German, Irish, French-Canadian American)

2. A Native American woman comes into the Writing Center looking a bit hesitant. You greet her and sit down to work. Her assignment asks her to evaluate the arguments presented in the Federalist Papers. She has not started writing yet. When you ask her questions, she gives one word answers. How will you proceed? (Provided by Molly, an Irish, Scottish, English American)

3. The writer walked into the Writing Center, and the moment he laid eyes on me, he seemed uneasy. He was white. When he found out I was the only tutor available, he looked even more uneasy. I found myself thinking, "Does he not want to work with me because I am an Asian American?" After he filled out his client information form, I understood his problem. The topic for his paper was an analysis of the American reaction to the Pearl Harbor attack, with a concentration on the Japanese American internment. I don't know whether or not he knew that I am of Japanese ancestry and that my grandparents had been interned, but he was very uncomfortable. And I must admit I was uncomfortable as well. If you can put yourself in my place, how would you proceed? If you can't, imagine a situation where an aspect of your life, a unique quality, would be put between you and a writer. Keep in mind, I can't hide my appearance. (provided by Keith, a Japanese American)

By posing these problems, we hoped to forced the prospective tutors into thinking about how ethnicity can cause friction in a tutoring session. The small

groups worked well because individuals could think aloud and build on other people's ideas. The assignment worked because the problems we posed were real, but more importantly, the discussions which followed opened some eyes. Realizing that everyone has ethnicity and that ethnic differences can affect a tutoring session was an important leap.

On the other hand, the practical application of the assignment was fairly limited. We only learned that a wide range of problems can come up and that there is no single way to solve each and every one. In fact, the only concrete conclusion we came to was that in such a situation, tutors never have to subordinate themselves into some assumed persona. Like anyone else, tutors have a tendency to play to their strengths and do what comes most naturally. Those tendencies should not be summarily repressed in search of a universal tutoring mode.

Another strategy in directing tutor training towards multi-ethnicity can be found in Muriel Harris' *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*. Harris uses Robert Kaplan's "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education" as the basis for an admittedly simplified but useful examination of cultural thought and writing patterns (88-94). Although generalizing about the thought patterns for entire cultures may be dangerous, an awareness of the existence and legitimacy of other thought patterns is important in conferences. If a paper does not seem to make sense, a problem may lie in cultural barriers rather than in English language deficiencies or weaknesses in analytical skills.

The reading assignment provoked discussion, and that alone made it successful. We wanted the students to think about how culture and writing are related, and they did. Some students thought that it was valuable to recognize different writing styles; they hadn't made a connection between different cultures and different writing styles.

Knowing which cultures tend toward what writing styles could be helpful because it could provide clues about individual writers. It could also be dangerous. We all recognized that generalizing can lead to stereotyping. Several students argued that Kaplan's classification system was harmful because it could lead tutors to "peg" people.

After a two month hiatus, the class met again. We wanted to reorient the tutors toward multiethnic issues. Trying to start a discussion, Molly provided an example of an ethnic clash she ran into a few years ago between a young, black woman and her white, male professor. The woman's paper used a condemnation of racism as a basic starting point and the professor responded by writing in the margin, "How do you know your audience isn't racist"?

The initial responses to Molly's dilemma were "highbrow." Everyone fell back onto the rhetoric of our tutoring philosophy. Students wanted to talk about writing as a process, about respecting the student's privacy, and about letting the student direct the session. We were all dancing around the real problem. The central issue wasn't really about tutoring; it was about power and politics. It was about racism. When Molly pointed that out, we all began thinking about ethnicity and our previous discussions. We began to talk about racism and about how we might deal with it. Everyone agreed that it was useful, even essential, to be reminded that racism exists in supposedly open-minded, liberal colleges. Colleges and college professors aren't immune. No one, however, was able to come up with a good solution to this specific problem, and we were forced to fall back on reiterating the importance of being ourselves and not seeking a universal tutor approach. Like so many of our other assignments, we raised issues and awareness; we did not solve problems.

Our goal was to examine ethnicity, and the class achieved that goal. We all be-

came more familiar, and thus more comfortable, with our own ethnicity. We increased the class's awareness of other cultures and ethnicities, and everyone learned a language to talk about ethnicity, a language that the staff can still use.

In a discussion six months after the course ended, the tutors agreed that the assignments were worthwhile and that our goals were good. Several tutors reiterated that the assignments brought up new issues, and that they helped to clarify ethnicity's relationship to tutoring. Many tutors believed that just openly discussing ethnicity made them more comfortable with ethnic diversity.

As the discussion progressed, however, we all voiced concerns about becoming overly sensitive to these issues. One tutor commented that we don't want to become preoccupied, thinking "Here I am from one culture, and here is my writer from another culture. As we meet over this paper, so do our cultures meet." The class concluded that a tutoring session is not an earth-shattering event. We all hope that the Writing Center is a friendly, comfortable place where exploration of ethnicity and culture can take place, but usually writers come in with expectations about writing help, not ethnic awareness.

When we, as teachers, assessed the results of redesigning the tutor training course, we found that we had intensely personal responses to the course material, a good sign that we addressed our own emerging ethnic identities. Although she believed in the course design, Molly worried that she had simply found a new and more complex way to assuage her white guilt. She was pleased that the conscious effort to think about ethnicity gave the course a fresh, unifying thread and that the students were very engaged in the topic, the assignments, and the course. The class had developed a level of trust not known in other tutor training classes. Banks' typology of emerging

ethnic identity gave her a way to think and to talk more precisely: she hopes someday to be a multiethnic teacher.

Writing papers, talking about the ideas, and trying to live them has made Molly more comfortable with her ethnicity and social class. "It may sound funny, but I am no longer uncomfortable with being a middle class, Irish Catholic lawyer." She doesn't have that familiar, uncomfortable feeling when working with a new minority student. She does not worry about being "cool" or patronizing. She hopes she is a less confusing tutor, sending fewer conflicting messages.

Pete, a black studies minor who went to high school in downtown Washington D.C., had his ideas on ethnicity reoriented. Previously, his ideas were oriented away from himself. He had learned much about other cultures and knew black politics, plays, and history; he studied Mexican sociology, South American literature and urban sociology. However, he hadn't really realized that he was ethnic. "That sounds ridiculous; I always knew I was Polish, German, French-Canadian and Irish. However, I thought of myself as the norm. I thought that I wasn't ethnic, everybody else was. Until I wrote about how my family celebrated Christmas, I figured I just did the typical, white-American thing."

Keith was particularly affected by the discussions of ethnic dilemmas. At times, especially at tense times, he forgets that there might not be just one right answer to a problem. He finds himself trying to do too much, trying to be too much. He had a preconceived notion that all tutors trained at our Writing Center should handle problems basically in the same way. He was trying to become the consummate professional, the perfect tutor. He hadn't realized that it's impossible to stop being himself. "I learned that my ethnicity, my culture, my world view, are so much a part of me that I can't, and shouldn't try to, separate myself from them. I can use my ethnicity as an asset instead of as a liability."

We hope that other tutors and teachers of tutors decide to explore multiethnic education. After one year, we can't show major improvements in minority student achievement at Colorado College; we can only say that the number of minority students using the Writing Center continues to creep upward. We remind ourselves that we have influence over only a small part of a student's learning experience at our college. Nonetheless, we know that we are different people because we taught this course, and we know that we tutor differently. If Banks is right, we have taken the first step toward becoming multiethnic teachers by examining our attitudes and identities. Next, we hope to reconsider the rest of the course content.

Peter Mulvihill (peer tutor), Keith Nitta (peer tutor), Molly Wingate (director)
Colorado College
Colorado Springs, CO

Works Cited

- Banks, James A. *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies*. 5th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1991.
- Harris, Muriel. *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1986.

Job Opening:

Writing Center Director

Doctoral degree in field related to English composition and writing. Experience as teacher of English composition and experience in administration of writing-related programs. Preferred qualifications: all of the above plus training and experience in WAC. Starting date: July 1, 1995. The search will remain open until the position is filled. For full consideration, submit letter, resume, and list of at least three references by March 15, 1995 to Dr. Jae-won Lee, Chair, Writing Center Search Committee, Office of the Provost, Cleveland State University, E. 24th and Euclid, Cleveland, Ohio 44115. CSU provides reasonable accommodation for individuals with disabilities.

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations (WCAs)

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

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

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

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

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

Book Review

Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center. Edited by Joan A. Mullin and Ray Wallace. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1994. 196 pages, paperbound. Price \$19.95; NCTE members: \$14.95. LC: 94-26357. Order from: NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.

(Ed. note: Because multiple reader responses can offer different perspectives on the same book, we offer two reviews of *Intersections*.)

Reviewed by Beth Boquet
Fairfield University
Fairfield, CT

I believe I speak for many of us who live and work in writing centers when I say that the publication of a new writing center collection is an event. So I try to savor it. I fix a cup of tea, I turn the phone off, I prop my feet up, and I indulge myself, thinking all the while, "This is a book written for me, about me."

But this time, things didn't go as smoothly as I'd planned—but not through any fault of the contributors or the editors—but for the simple reason that I couldn't decide who I was.

Indulge me for a moment while I explain. Until recently, my interest in writing centers was fairly un-dimensional: I was a graduate student writing a dissertation on writing centers, with the attendant luxury of self-immersion that such activity allows. Every article I read, every person I talked to, every thought I had was granted manuscript-potential.

Six months ago, still completing the dissertation, I began a new job directing the writing center and teaching in the English department of a private, liberal arts university. This is how the complication arose.

As I began to read *Intersection: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center* (with my feet propped up and my tea in my hand), I realized that I could no longer so single-mindedly consume essays on writing center theory or practice or theory-practice. I had to know who I was doing the work. Was I the doctoral candidate still seeking connections (as I was so accustomed to being)? Was I the administrator trying to determine how, where, and whether these articles "spoke" to our writing center? Or was I the instructor planning to teach this book in the spring semester tutor-training seminar? I had to decide. Now, I know enough about contemporary theory to know that such boundaries do not hold, that these relationships of teacher/administrator/researcher are fluid, constantly in flux. No matter. The tension I felt was real.

In considering how I might want to present this book in a review, I first tried to determine the needs of its readers in light of my own needs as a reader. Therefore, I've decided to offer the following suggestions on the basis of my own experience. In other words, I will present my perspectives on this collection from the point of view of a researcher, an administrator, and a teacher.

Reviewed by Paula Gillespie
Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI

At the 1994 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Nashville, I remarked to a friend, Carl Glover, that the way people used the term "theory" was confusing to me. I had come to know theory in the sciences, and through my undergraduate psychology major. Theory situated itself between hypothesis and law; theory was something substantial. Overturning it or disagreeing with it was a major event. Literary theory had not fit the scientific definition I felt comfortable with, and now I was grappling with the term as it applied to rhetoric. "Here," he said, "theory is often just someone's politics." His statement, so appropriate for the Nashville setting, has come back to me repeatedly as I have read *Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center*, for this book, with its essays on the kinds of theories that are typically discussed at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, raises political questions in interesting ways, and the politics, it turns out, are our politics, not hypothetical politics in the abstract, but immediately relevant to what we do and how we are seen.

Clearly, some theories are more overtly political than others. That is, they say more about power relationships than others do. Marxist and feminist theories deal directly with power and hegemony. They address politics explicitly. Other theories may seem only to describe behavior or ways of learning: cognitive psychology, the darling of writing research of ten years ago, and the source of many of our current beliefs about writing processes, seemed simply to be a description of what students do when they write. Yet there are implications about power relationships embedded within it, implications that changed the ways we thought about teaching writing, about the value we were willing or unwilling to place on that knowledge, and implications about the things we said to students about their writing processes. Deconstruction, of course, challenges systems of absolute truth and the nature of our conception of language.

As we look at the theories that *Intersections* examines, we can see that there are either explicit or implicit power relationships involved in them, relationships which affect the interactions between us and our students, between writing center directors and our staff, between us and our institutions, and between us and the field of composition and rhetoric in general.

Boquet (cont.)

The researcher in me enjoyed the challenge presented by several authors in this collection, most notably Hobson, Murphy, and Gillam, to the existing paradigm of knowledge-making in writing center theory. These essays question the very theoretical principles on which our practice claims to rest.

The collection begins with an article by Eric Hobson provocatively titled "Writing Center Practice Often Counters Its Theory. So What?" a piece which, as its name suggests, is intriguing for its brazen contradiction of the need for theory-practice harmony. Yet what Hobson ultimately illustrates to his readers is not so much the disjuncture of writing center theory and practice as the writing center community's ability to extrapolate theory from practice in a manner which often flies in the face of institutional constraints.

Christina Murphy and Alice Gillam offer cogent critiques of two specific areas of writing center theory-practice: social constructionist theory and collaborative learning theory, respectively. Murphy's essay uses Lunsford's 1991 article "Collaboration, Control and the Idea of a Writing Center" as a reference point for her thesis that social constructionist theory does not, possibly cannot, translate into practice. She writes, "Lunsford, like other theorists, never makes quite clear exactly how this transfer of power is to occur and exactly *how* it will be mediated within the constructs of American education" (30). Gillam begins her article, like Murphy, by outlining the opposition to the theoretical perspective she has chosen to investigate. The majority of her piece, however, focuses on examining a particular case, which Gillam uses to illustrate that "critical operations of theory can challenge and enlarge our understanding of practice" (51).

Next, this collection provided several articles which address particularly well key administrative issues I have encountered since I began my job six months ago. Jay Jacoby's insights in his article "'The Use of Force': Medical Ethics and Center Practice" seem quite timely. As he notes, our profession is exhibiting an increasing interest in the ethics of our practices, yet few people have offered specific models for ethical practice in the writing center. This article's title, taken from a William Carlos Williams' short story, is well-suited to the essay's emphasis on the ethics and (at times) the cost of tutorial investigation in the writing process.

Mary Abascal-Hildebrand's essay on reflective practice, "Tutor and Student Relations: Applying Gadamer's Notions of Translation," inspired me, reminding me of the joys of administration at a time when I had been feeling overwhelmed by the burdens of the job. Abascal-Hildebrand writes, "[T]o become a living bridge, tutors must be able to grasp the essential meanings of their *own* tutoring lifeworld, and make the translations available, not as pairs of meanings extracted from some artificial matrix. Rather, tutors must make these translations available through *newly constituted* meanings that are created out of each tutoring session" (178). Here, the author confirms my sense that it is through reflective practice that theory and practice most fruitfully intersect.

Gillespie (cont.)

The way we use theory and the theories we choose involve political stances. The well-written and well-chosen essays in this valuable collection help us to think through our political stances by showing the way these theories relate to writing center practices.

Joan Mullin's essay "Literacy and the Technology of Writing: Examining Assumptions, Changing Practices" examines the power relationships the writing center espouses when it accepts a stance on and defines literacy. If we define literacy as mere technology, or mastery of a set of rules, then we have accepted the power relationships inherent in our academic and social status quo, and, implicitly, we may well have urged students to take a passive stance, accept powerlessness. This definition of literacy as technology, her tutors say, leads to practices which "silence students and devalue them as learners" (168). Mullin argues that our definition of literacy, rather, should include reflective critiques and assessments of the contexts in which the student is writing, and of the way texts are read and interpreted. In the writing center, rather than devalue the students' abilities, we should draw on their language competencies and help students understand their own purposes, audiences, and contexts for writing. We can help students envision the way a text can affect a reader and sometimes change oppressive situations.

Christina Murphy, in "The Writing Center and Social Constructionist Theory," also asks how we position ourselves in relationship to our students and the world we want to help them survive in. She surveys the literature which asks whether social constructionist theory is liberating to students or complicit in affirming a socially elitist world order. By asking students to work together in groups we might seem to be assuming an equality which often does not exist. She asks whether we should accept the assumption that we should follow the models of the workplace, and whether we should assume that their collaborative methods will work in educational settings. How, she asks, is Andrea Lunsford's idea of the Burkean Parlor actually going to play itself out? She concludes that rather than let all our practices be determined by one theory, however much the ideals of that theory might appeal to us, we should follow the learning styles of the students we serve, adapting our sessions to their needs by using those methods that will serve them best. This essay touches on power relationships which affect us on all levels: with students and tutors, with our colleagues, with our universities, and with the world of work.

Alice Gillam's essay "Collaborative Learning Theory and Peer Tutoring Practice" analyzes three approaches to collaboration and shows how problematic it is to try to find one overarching notion of what collaborations means or should be in a tutorial. Our sessions with students are complicated by power relationships within the tutorial, but also from without, as students who come to us and negotiate their roles also bring

Boquet (cont.)

Finally, several articles struck me as especially teachable: Julie Neff's "Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center"; Muriel Harris' "Individualized Instruction in Writing Centers: Attending to Cross-Cultural Differences"; and Pamela Farrell-Childers' "A Unique Learning Environment." Though much of what was contained in these articles was not necessarily new information to me, the authors offer a straightforward assessment of their topics, providing a readable introduction for students. I plan to supplement these articles with in-class visits by our campus expert on students with learning disabilities and by a representative from our Office of Multi-Cultural Relations.

One thing remains on my wish list for this book: It would have been helpful to me if the editors had offered some cues in the table of contents regarding the organizational principle of the book, although Joan Mullin does explain their rationale in her introduction. This is a minor point, however, which should in no way detract from the important contribution to the field that the Mullin-Wallace collection makes.

As I wrap up this review, I would like to thank Joan Mullin and Ray Wallace, as well as the contributors to this collection for making this book happen. For me personally, this book has provided some much-needed closure to two years of research and writing on writing centers. I can finally sit back, relax, and say, "Yes. This book is for me. This book is about me."

Work Cited

Lunsford, Andrea. "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center," *Writing Center Journal* 12.1, 1991, pp. 3-10.

Gillespie (cont.)

to our sessions complicated patterns of collaboration not only with teachers but also with texts. Gillam concludes that "it is time we utilize theory to understand and interrogate the rich complexity... and the protean forms of writing center practice to interrogate and reinterpret theory" (51). Eric Hobson, in "Writing Center Practice Often Counters Its Theory. So What?" traces the history of our theory and practice and then examines what contemporary critics say about this complex and vexed relationship. He concludes, then, that no single theory will suffice for us; we must "reshape theory to fit our particular needs. . . ." even though this could place us in a seemingly equivocal position, according to less flexible and less pragmatic understandings of what theory is and should be.

Some of the essays in *Intersections* apply their theories almost verbatim to the tutoring situation, while others critique the theories they examine and call, either implicitly or explicitly, for us to do our own theorizing. As we read this collection, with its eclectic and intriguing palate of theories, we are led to the following questions. What does it mean to align ourselves with Martin Buber as opposed to Gadamer or the field of text linguistics? Do we somehow make our ethical practices more acceptable by grounding them in medical ethics? These theories not only color and help to explain the dynamics of the tutorials we conduct, but if we make our theoretical bases known, they will position us advantageously or disadvantageously, depending on our own contexts, within our departments and within our professions at large. We want not only to be good, we want to look good. It is important that we keep up with and be conversant about the theories that our colleagues—both in and out of writing centers—are discussing, and that we ask ourselves what the relevance is for our practice.

This rich collection of essays acquaints some of us from the ground up and reacquaints others with the breadth of theory we have at our disposal. And it reminds us that the theories we choose will position us within the power relationships we must negotiate in order to continue to do our work. This book is a must for our writing center libraries, and a wonderful source for thoughtful training of our tutors.

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**Troy State
University**

Writing Across-the-Curriculum Workshops
April 7-8, 1995
Troy, Alabama
Workshop leader: Pamela Farrell-Childers

The Troy State University WAC Program is sponsoring a program-planning workshop, on April 7, and a faculty workshop for writing across the curriculum, on April 8. For registration information, contact Joan Word, WAC Coordinator, Wright Hall 133, Troy State University, Troy, AL 36082 (334-670-3349).

TUTORS' COLUMN

Seeing the possibilities

As writing tutors we have the opportunity to help students learn to appreciate and take advantage of their own authorship. Donald Murray writes that "Effective student writing occurs when the student finds a way to take an assignment and move it to his or her own territory, writing with authority" (Murray 28). That confidence is an important part of being an author. We want student writers to enjoy writing, and enjoy the freedom of creating words on a page. But if student writers don't realize that they have a voice, that they have something to say, and that they know how to say it, writing won't be an enjoyable experience. They may choose not to write, or they may feel limited in what they can do. Three students helped me to understand some ways that we, as writing tutors, can help students develop confidence in their writing, or in other words, how we can help students see the possibilities of their own abilities.

The first student came seeking help in writing a play critique:

"I have to write a critique on the play, *The Persians*. We're supposed to put what the author was trying to say."

"Okay. What do you think he was trying to say?"

"I don't know. Have you seen the play?"

"No, I haven't, but you just went and saw it didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"So, what was it about?"

"I don't know. I mean, it's just about the Persians, I guess."

As we talked I was thumbing through the program notes he had brought. "It looks like the story talks about a certain battle. What happened? Who won?"

It took him a little while to remember what he had seen and realize that he knew at least the basic plot of the play, but he did. It surprised him because, as he told me about what happened during the drama, he was able to see other analytical views he hadn't noticed before.

This experience taught me that one way to help students see the possibilities of their own abilities is to help student writers realize how much they already know. In this case, it wasn't hard for me to do because I hadn't seen the play. I knew nothing about it. He was the only hope for both of us. My questions grew out of necessity. But I was glad because I was able to see the value in focusing on what he knew as a place to begin, instead of adding what I knew right off.

Another experience helped me to see more clearly how tutors can help keep the focus on the abilities of the student. One day a student came in with a descriptive paragraph he wanted me to look over. He said, "I'm not sure if it's descriptive enough."

I read it and commented, "You've described what you saw very well. I can imagine the cars and the volcano and the palm trees (he had written about a trip to the Mirage Casino in Las Vegas). This is all visual. What other senses might you have used?"

"Senses?"

"Yes. You wrote about what you saw. That's sight. What else is there?"

"Oh," he said, "you mean like hearing, taste, . . . smell, and touch."

"Exactly. For example, what did you hear as you arrived at the casino? Music? A crowd? Was there a certain smell? Did it smell like what you expected, or did it smell different?"

"I remember it smelled fresh and clean, like after a rain."

"There you go. What made it smell that way?"

And so on and so on. The student knew about what he was writing. It was a familiar experience. He also knew what the senses were. What he didn't realize was how to apply what he knew about senses to describe the scene he was writing about. He'd forgotten for the moment that our senses connect us to the physical world. So, trying to describe the physical world using only one sense was like trying to play baseball with only three players. You can do it, but it's hard to cover all the bases. There's something missing, and the game is more complete when all the players are there. He sensed that in his paragraph. The first thing he told me was, "I'm not sure if it's descriptive enough," or in other words, "I know I've described something, but it seems incomplete, like there could be more." He just needed to remember that sensory perception isn't limited to one sense. Again, I learned that an important part of helping students see the possibilities of their own abilities is to help them recognize the knowledge they already have so they can apply it in their writing.

The third student taught me how we can keep the focus on the abilities of the student, even when it becomes necessary

to share what we know and teach a specific principle. I was working with a student on a paper where she had to explain an abstract mathematical principle (deductive and inductive logic). The approach she chose was metaphorical. She created an x set out of a certain group of people and began identifying certain names of people in that set as belonging to subsets, in order to show how logic could be used to assume generalities or prove truths. As I read her paper, I saw the connection between the humans and the variables, and how the variables were supposed to represent the humans. However, I didn't recognize the names she used, meaning I didn't know what characteristics the people had, because I didn't know who they were. It was hard for me to relate those names with the characteristics of the sets she had described. As we discussed these paragraphs, I expressed my concern.

"Should I use a different name then?" she replied.

"Well, who is that person?"

"It's my roommate, but I guess you don't know her. Maybe I should use something generic like Jane Doe."

"That could work, as long as your reader is familiar with those names."

"The names I used were real people, but I could also just make up some names, too. Which kind of name is right? What would you use?"

Her questions were interesting for me because I happened to have a preference. I liked using the real names. It seemed more human. However, as I thought about how best to respond to her question, I realized that this wasn't a matter of what I liked or didn't like, nor was it a question of right and wrong. The issue was what worked and what didn't work in this particular situation. I told her, "None of the names you've suggested are right or wrong. It depends on what you want to do. The thing that confused me wasn't the type of name you used. What confused me was the fact that I

didn't know who the person was. Whether or not you use the name of a real person, a fictitious name, or something like Jane Doe doesn't matter as long as you let your reader know who that person is."

In this example, the student was unsure of how to proceed so I gave a suggestion. I emphasized the principle behind the advice ("It's confusing because I don't know who the name is") instead of the advice itself ("This name needs to be changed"). We discussed the advice, or in other words, the fact that something needed to be done with the name, but the decision of how to remedy the confusion was left up to her. This helped her see the possibilities of her own abilities because she, as the author, had the power and ability to make a wise choice. She understood the principle behind the problem, or in other words, she understood what factors would govern a choice that worked in the situation.

As writing tutors we help student writers see how much ability they have within themselves to write well. Stephen North wisely suggests that "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (Harris 32). When we keep that in mind, our focus will be on helping student writers see the possibilities of their own abilities, and that helps them become better writers because they see that they themselves are, or can be, a source of good writing. We do this by helping student writers recognize what they already know and how to apply that knowledge, and by helping students understand the principles behind the suggestions we give, whenever it becomes necessary to teach and instruct. I asked my roommate why she goes to tutors for help, specifically writing tutors. She said, "Because they know more than I do, or at least that's how I see them. They can show me what to do." She's right, a writing tutor can show her what to do. But more importantly, a writing tutor can show her what *she* can do.

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Question Exchange

In the February issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, there was an invitation to exchange useful questions you ask as a tutor. Beth Boquet responded with the following:

I thought I'd add a question to the Question Exchange. One of my professors taught us to use "How would it change your meaning if . . . ?" in our classroom peer response groups. It helped to get around the reluctance some readers have of criticizing someone's paper—seems to really emphasize the optional nature of the suggestion. I have used it in the Writing Center as well, particularly if I'm feeling the need to be directive but don't want to come right out and say "DO THIS."

I teach it to my students too. In fact one semester, the students took it upon themselves to change the phrase to Huh-wicky-my (HWICYMI). So they would just say to each other "Huh-wicky-my you moved this closer to the beginning?" It was interesting to see them start to own it.

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What's a useful question you've asked? Send yours to the newsletter's Question Exchange.

Initiated into the fraternity of powerful knowers: How collaborative technology has ethically legitimized writing centers

"Alternative"—that's how writing centers were marketed in the early 1980s, following the lead set by Kenneth Bruffee in 1984 that writing centers provide an "alternative" to the "traditional" classroom by offering a different social context for learning—a community of status equals (8). Since Bruffee's declaration, writing centers have been referred to as "nontraditional," "on the fringes," and most noticeably "in the margins." The appeal of writing centers has rested on *not* being considered part of "the Fraternity of Powerful Knowers." But many of us who work within writing centers have begun to question whether or not this perception is still accurate. Are we still "in the margins" or have writing centers been initiated into the fraternity of academia? Can we still tout ourselves as being an "alternative" to the classroom environment?

Ironically, when Bruffee declared writing centers to be "alternative" in the 1980s, writing center directors were frantically trying to convince administrators and faculty that writing centers *were* a vital part of the academic fraternity. During the eighties, therefore, journals and newsletters were filled with suggestions for expanding centers and making our presence visible on campus through faculty newsletters, graduate student workshops, WAC programs, community outreach, etc. The assumption seemed to be that if we continued to expand the scope of writing centers, we'd eventually be initiated into the fraternity. This desire, according to Donald Bushman, was not surprising because "writing center professionals feel the need to be 'at home' in the university setting" (270).

Part of this need has been the direct result of the acceptance (or lack of acceptance) that writing centers have experienced—especially within departments of

English. As Stephen North articulated, writing centers were often seen as "fix it" centers designed to help English instructors with under-prepared students—or as one of my past colleagues said, "to help deal with those students who shouldn't even be in college." When writing centers were not misunderstood in this manner, writing centers were mistrusted. Perhaps the most vivid example of this mistrust was cited by Richard Behm in the Fall/Winter 1989 issue of *Writing Center Journal*: "In the last year . . . our tutoring program was challenged by an English faculty member on the grounds that we were in violation of university policy because the tutorial assistance that we were providing to students was a form of plagiarism" (3). In this article, Behm acknowledges that students who receive collaborative assistance during the writing process typically do receive higher grades than they would have merited if they simply had been given the assignment and told a due date. It is this discrepancy to which Behm attributes the dilemma. As that particular faculty member pointed out to Behm, "when a student receives assistance on a draft of a paper, or even discovering ideas for a paper that is to be graded, the work is no longer solely that of the student" (3).

Wanting to be part of the fraternity, many writing centers attempted to address this and many other ethical issues. So in addition to expanding the scope of writing centers, many articles published in the *Writing Center Journal* during the eighties gave suggestions for addressing various ethical dilemmas that arise in the center: Gary Lichenstein's (1983) "Ethics of Peer Tutoring in Writing," Irene Clark's (1988) "Collaboration and Ethics in Writing Center Pedagogy," and Richard Behm's (1989) "Ethical Issues in Peer Tutoring." Likewise, the *Writing*

Lab Newsletter published Jennifer Herek and Mark Niquette's (1990) "Ethics in the Writing Lab: Tutoring Under the Honor Code" and a regular column on writing center ethics.

As a result, many writing centers became aware of the need to keep faculty informed, and thus began publishing detailed forms or a simple printout of client names for faculty. In extreme cases, some writing centers resorted to permission slips. As Herek and Niquette shared about their particular center, "the tutoring process begins with a faculty contract and faculty consent for the student to work in the Lab. A faculty member must sign a form granting permission to the student to work in the Lab" (14). Similarly, in my first position as a writing center director five years ago, I was told by several English faculty that "we want to know if our students are getting outside help on their papers." One faculty member suggested I use a "release form" and handed me a copy of the form used by a nearby university. The form read, "Dear Faculty Member, The student named below has requested writing assistance in the following course. It is our policy that students must have their instructors' acknowledgment in order to receive assistance on any written work for which they receive a grade Please sign this form and return it to the student or send it by campus mail."

While these various attempts to improve the image of writing centers did have some impact on the academic community, I would argue that it was not until the early 1990s with the introduction of electronic technology into the composition classroom that writing centers were fully accepted into the academic fraternity. In much the same way that writing centers developed out of something faculty and students had been do-

ing since the inception of higher education—collaborating, the idea to use electronic technology in the classroom developed out of something faculty had been doing for years. Just as collaboration between peers had been happening outside the official classroom setting, so had e-mail. In a 1987 article, Joyce Kinkead states, “those of us teaching in the writing program were using e-mail as a conversation tool . . . it struck us that if we enjoyed mail so much, our students might have the same reaction” (338).

Indeed, Kinkead’s speculation was quite accurate. Faculty and students readily accepted using electronic technology in the classroom. As Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe discovered, most academic articles written during the late eighties which address the technology in the classroom could be described as “primarily of the laudatory influence of computers” (55). Assessing the results of a questionnaire given to writing instructors at the 1988 Conference on Computers in Writing, Hawisher and Selfe discovered why computers received such praise during the eighties. When asked to explain why they prefer using computers to traditional methods of teaching writing, questionnaire respondents listed the following: 1) Students spend a great deal of time writing; 2) Lots of peer teaching goes on; and 3) Class becomes more student-centered than teacher-centered. In other words, teachers praised computers for exactly the things that writing centers had been promoting: peer collaboration in a student-centered environment.

The advantages of using e-mail in the classroom continue to remain astoundingly similar to the advantages students experience when they enter the writing center. Both focus on writing as an act of communicating, rather than a mechanism for evaluation. As Trent Batson explains in “Teaching in Networked Classroom,” like the writing center, “the computer supplies the missing link between speaking and writing” (250). Students can “talk it out” on the screen. Several theorists have even drawn parallels between e-mail and phone conversa-

tion because the informality almost demands that students write like they talk. And students are not restricted to only one “phone call” (i.e., the phone call to the teacher). With e-mail, students can collaborate with numerous people—people not necessarily in the same class. Hence “because of the potential volume of correspondence,” Kinkead speculates that most teachers “will find it impossible to ‘stay up’ or control the flow and will perforce move out of the center of activity” (633). Like the writing center, then, composition classrooms using electronic technology are usually student-centered because instructors lose control over the pacing of collaboration in the classroom. Unlike the student writing groups of the eighties that could be fairly controlled by the instructor (i.e., size of group, membership in group, length of time in group, discussion of group, etc.), the instructor may find it difficult to identify when and where and with whom collaboration has occurred on e-mail. E-mail allows students to log-on at various locations (anywhere students find a computer that has a connection to the network) similar to the satellite writing centers that are beginning to appear on many campuses. Also, students are not restricted to collaborating during class hours or faculty office hours. Students can log-on 24 hours a day. Granted, writing centers have yet to have enough resources to be open 24 hours a day, but most writing centers have always flaunted extended hours in the morning, afternoon, and evening hours.

Perhaps what I find most convincing, though, about the similarities between e-mail and writing centers is that *both* are pitted against the “traditional” classroom; both are marketed as “alternative.” For example, Batson makes the statement, “In a *traditional* class, the students are on their own . . . with a CB-like utility, students and teachers can freewrite [emphasis added]” (251). Also, Gail Hawisher and Charles Moran claim that “E-mail discussion might well have the potential, then, to encourage students who are sometimes silenced because of their status, race, handicap, or gender to ‘speak up,’ to participate in ways that

they avoid in *traditional* class settings [emphasis added]” (634).

I believe e-mail has ethically legitimized the collaboration that occurs within writing centers; however, I am concerned about the implications of this realization. Because both writing centers and e-mail are seen as “alternative” to the traditional classroom, I fear that writing centers risk being usurped by e-mail. For example, realizing that students who would be terrified to confront the many faces in the writing center can simply interact anonymously on e-mail, many writing centers are now offering “electronic tutors” and “on-line help.” This trend concerns me, especially as writing centers are confronted with ever-decreasing budgets, because it sends the message to administrators that e-mail offers the same advantages as writing centers do. Maintaining an e-mail account and having the director log-on as an “electronic tutor” are more cost-efficient than paying tutor salaries. Thus, becoming mainstream and being accepted within our institutions may actually prove to be somewhat detrimental. While we may not be marginalized any more, we may have become too much like other services on campus. As writing center directors, we need to take the time to examine how classroom technology has affected how we are perceived by our colleagues and our clients. Has being initiated into the fraternity made us less of an “alternative”?

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Report from a correctional institution: I need help

I am writing to describe my situation as the supervisor of a community college writing lab because I am getting frustrated. We are set up to do the impossible and we keep trying. The result is an attempted standardization of unkempt English in fifteen tutoring minutes. But first, a little background.

The English/ESL Department at Los Angeles City College, distinguished by its merging of the two departments and whole book approach, needs a writing center. The premise is that one-on-one consultation is a powerful method of helping writers. A significant number of LA City College students, non-native and native speakers, are not prepared for college writing. Many have limited exposure to literature and history, never read, never have, and avoid writing. The center cannot give these students immediate resolution to the problems they encounter in college, but it can provide invaluable strategies and support. Our writing center, as it is set up now, however, is getting itself into a corner. Our methods are verging on the monotonous. I will describe our constraints to see if we are alone in our predicaments and to ask for your ideas and suggestions.

The first problem is also the writing center's main strength, the informality of our approach. We operate on a drop-in basis. In some ways, this best suits LA City College students. So many work or have families that appointments are

rarely kept. By keeping our doors open as many hours as we can, we make ourselves available to as many students as possible. There is also a casual graciousness to having students drop in, sit down wherever they want, alone or with friends, to summon a tutor as needed, often not. Our set-up, with long tables in rows, allows for spontaneous collaboration. The overall effect of this communal and informal tutoring center is to reduce tension and encourage conversation and naturalness. I can't think of anything better for a nervous writer.

But a drop-in can also be a drive-through. We end up doing just what we say we don't. What else can a tutor accomplish in ten minutes but a quick grammar check followed by a two-minute writing prescription with a friendly smile? The tutors edit, correct grammar, write on student papers, tell instead of ask. As the flow of students is unpredictable, there are daily overflows of uncomfortable noise and crowding followed by hours of silence. Students who come when it's busy don't get enough time; they complain, they don't come back. Also, keep in mind that the lab operates with the full support and benign neglect of the department. Instructors rarely give students any reason to go to the lab except to "get help." Students often don't know what to expect from us. Even more frequently, a student has no clear idea of what the assignment is that he is supposed to be working on.

Nor is there any follow-up. The tutors don't talk to the instructors who don't ask. There is little continuity in our work with individuals because students return irregularly. How, then, can we subscribe to the recursive elements of writing, or to the writing process itself, when we sit beside a person for a short while, saying what we can, suggesting and correcting as we do, to then watch a paper leave on its one-way route through the instructor to the garbage can, the student on his way out of academia, and our tutor on to the next case of indifference, stubborn in its desire for good grades?

The issues that arise, then, are that we don't make better writers—just better papers; we often encourage student passivity and dependence; and we talk about the process of writing, but we don't proceed that way. When we do rise above being common grammar checkers, it is because the student tutors are so warm, humane and gracious that the students respond in kind.

I have observed other writing centers and read about them too. I know many instructors hand out clear assignments and follow up on their students. I guess such people sleep better because the quality of life improves when selves are empowered and writers have found their voices. But here, tutor-student time is brief and unpredictable, tutors often correct incorrectly, misunderstand students' misinterpretations of assignments, and

few comprehend accountability because grades are more important. Instructors, for their part, hope our work will make theirs easier.

There are reasons for this. Tutors often don't want the instructors to know what they are doing. It would make them nervous. Many instructors don't want to submit their assignments to our lab because they're insecure too. They can hear our howls just as they themselves have laughed correcting papers. Being in an English department can be embarrassing, whether you're correcting or writing those essays.

Hopefully, the writing center is where the confusions of being a student and an instructor can be appreciated and discussed, where the fears all writers share are expressed and worked through, where writing problems are identified and humanized. This takes time, and careful attention must be paid, so hard when we are so underpaid. My tutors earn from \$15 to \$50 a week. My salary as a Language Skills Instructional Assistant is \$12 an hour.

Lack of funds means that the lab is losing students who leave for better computers. Our IBM's can't remember anything. Our approach is also outdated. We see computers as ancillary to the writing process; that is, a handwritten draft is later typed, printed out and turned in. But these days many compose on the keyboard and paper is obviated in cases where students, instructors, and tutors use e-mail. No more pencils, no more paper! No more papers? With Internet, will there be Internetional co-authorship? Collaboration in nanoseconds? At LA City College, we continue typing those papers. Considerations of how the computer has, could, should or better not influence how we write, learn and research are beyond our purview. Yet as I read the articles in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, I can't help but wonder if we could ever create a writing center in Cyberspace.

I am aware of some obvious first steps we should take to make students more

responsible for their writing. We should, as Amanda Inskip Corcoran says, "offer professional development workshops to educate the consultant in guided as opposed to directed tutorials." (13). But how? I pay my tutors for the hours they work in the lab. I don't have extra money for meetings, they don't have extra time, and I can't assemble them. We're a loyal, disparate group. Perhaps, I should reduce their working hours and put the money towards training them. That means we can't cover the floor, and we'll either cut back on our hours or the number of students we serve.

We could even change our policy from unscheduled to scheduled sessions. This makes me think of the writing center at UCLA, quiet and carpeted, humming with technology and the purposefulness of well-paid tutors who work with students one-on-one once a week. Scheduling tutoring would introduce a level of calm and order into our writing center, modulate the flow, and give tutors more time per student. But our numbers would drop! If the college president walks by and sees an empty writing center, we don't get funded. Students who use the lab sign up for credit. They bring in money. We could refine ourselves out of existence if we serve a smaller population better. I, the supervisor, bear the ultimate responsibility for the writing center's effectiveness, but if you dropped in one day, you would see a harried woman trying to clean five disks suddenly stricken by viruses while appeasing four elderly Russian-Armenians who are waiting for her attention. A young Korean woman reading Louis Lowry's *Number the Stars* listens as a tutor explains what happened to the Jews in World War II. Now the book begins to make sense! A nursing student with a learning disorder is trying to write an essay about Hegelian dichotomies in *Candide*. She is having trouble. A young man from Ethiopia is struggling with an assignment asking him whether Huck is a coward or whether he has greater integrity than Twain himself. He has no idea. The language of *Huckleberry Finn* is incomprehensible. The tutor, whose native culture is equally re-

moved, hasn't read it either, and she suggests he pick one theme from the book and focus on that. I guess.

To conclude, the writing center is pivotal in the English Department. We are well situated, next to the offices of the instructors, we enjoy their support, and our students are the most interesting, diverse and motivated people we could hope to teach. I fear that our tutoring however, is degrading into a mundane and cursory correctional style that is hard to avoid because of how we're set up, with our quick, sporadic, isolated offerings of help. Of course we need money. Without it and the time it buys, our premises remain unexamined and our practice uninformed and messy. What pains me is the realization that many marginalized students who come to us stay on the outside. As instructors pass them to me and I pass them to tutors, I see that those students who are or are not passing their classes are dropping out or slinking by a system that neither helps nor fails them. This is serious. Our writing center needs innovation that balances the good we do with the improvements we could make. Got any ideas?

Don't fax. Forget e-mail. Just write to: Alexandra Maeck, English/ESL, Los Angeles City College, 855 North Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles CA 90029. Or dial (213) 953-4037.

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(Ed. note: To those of you who have a word of wisdom—or comfort—to offer and are willing to share your responses with newsletter readers, send your comments to me. Perhaps we can have an on-going conversation about problems which are not unique to Los Angeles Community College.)

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Undermining the System

This column is the second in a series (or third, depending on how you look at it) addressing the "Top Ten Reasons Why Writing Centers Are Unethical." In last month's column, I focused on the rather bizarre belief—held by relatively few academics in this day and age, thank goodness—that writing center tutors actually seize control of the papers that students bring into conferences and either write the papers themselves or tell the students how they should be written. In my reflections on this peculiar point of view, I suggested that the foundations for this belief are closely tied to the pedagogical and epistemological assumption that writing takes place, and should take place, in isolation from the rest of the world—from other texts, from other writers, from readers, from virtually everybody apart from the writer him/herself. The absurdity of this particular myth should, I think, be apparent to most everyone who has ever written anything, but the tenacity of the belief rivals that of smallpox or malaria: just when we think we've got it stamped out, it suddenly and unexpectedly reappears in some distant corner of the world.

This same pernicious myth is, I believe, at the heart of the next two reasons I consider in this column, to wit:

8) Writing centers are unethical because they undermine academic systems that evaluate students on the basis of 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 instruc-

tors' 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?

I suppose I could begin my attack on these reasons by questioning the rather quaint and naive assumption that letter grades are, in truth, "accurate reflections of a student's abilities" or that instructors' goals for writing assignments are always "to evaluate individual student learning and progress." But that would be too easy, and it would only sidestep the more important issue of institutional accountability which these critiques seek to address. (They also address, at least obliquely, the issue of where and how learning takes place, but I'll get to that in next month's column.)

Academic institutions clearly serve an important gatekeeping function in our society, a function that I would not wish to deny or waste my time arguing against (not that it would do me any good to do so anyway). Their role as gatekeepers has the force of long-standing tradition, practical necessity, governmental support, and professional sanction behind it, and it should be no surprise that high schools, colleges, and universities take this role rather seriously. The primary and ostensible purpose of the schools may be to provide "an education" to their students, but at least as important to society at large is their function as assessment instruments. They don't just give degrees; they rank their students. Given the limited number of slots available in colleges, in graduate schools, in medical schools, and in law schools, and given also the tremendous competition

for those slots, this sort of ranking is a vital—albeit occasionally distasteful—necessity. We must, I think, take this as an ineluctable fact of life.

But by the same token, I don't believe that writing centers undermine this harsh reality in any meaningful way. I won't reiterate what I said in my last column about how ignorant some instructors may be about what goes on in writing center conferences, but I think it is worthwhile in this context to reaffirm one of the axioms that we have long ascribed to, even before Steve North stated it so eloquently in "The Idea of a Writing Center": "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing. Any given project. . . is for the writer the prime, often the exclusive concern. . . . In the center, though, we look beyond or through that particular project, that particular text, and see it as an occasion for addressing our primary concern, the process by which it is produced" (438).

We may look at student papers and talk about them; we may ask questions about content and make observations about style; we may even spend an entire conference going through a single paragraph sentence by sentence trying to help a student make it more coherent. But our primary concern is always to help the student learn. This does not, to me, in any way undermine either the important ranking function that school systems fulfill or the assessment goals that individual instructors have for their assignments. Personally, I would *want* to provide higher rankings to students who were so motivated to succeed on their assignments that they actively sought out assistance from a campus unit that was designed and trained to provide it. I wish more of my own students would show that sort of initiative. Do institu-

tions and instructors *really* want their students to write papers in complete isolation, never showing the papers to friends, family, or tutors for advice, and never seeking help with their writing—even when they desperately need it? I find it hard to believe that anyone would answer yes to this question or that anyone would seriously believe that this sort of supplementary feedback and intervention would qualify as “cheating.”

On a purely pragmatic, gut-reaction level, I must also admit I find it hard to believe that a few one-hour conferences in the writing center would have a major impact on a student’s overall grade in a particular class or overall ranking in relation to other students at the same level. In fact, I can think of only two scenarios where this might occur. In the first scenario, the instructor never assigns any in-class writing, has no midterm or final exams, has no

course activities or projects to supervise, never discusses student drafts in class or during office hours, and bases the entire grade on the one or two papers he/she assigns and never sees until they are turned in on the due date. To my mind, instructors like this clearly aren’t interested in their students or their students’ writing anyway, so I have little sympathy for whatever point of view they might care to express about the writing center. If I am undermining the instructors’ goals for these courses, then I’ll be the proudest underminer on the block! In the second scenario, the time spent by a student in the writing center, talking about papers, actually crystallizes that student’s thinking about the subject matter of the course, improves the student’s perceptions, and leads to an overall improvement in performance in all aspects of the course. To my mind—not that this has ever, to my knowledge, happened to me—this would be a transcendent fulfillment of everything we hope might be ac-

complished in a writing center, an embodiment of the deep, ingrained links among language, learning, writing, and knowledge that we all know to exist. Rather than being a subversion of educational or institutional goals, this phenomenon would instead be an example of their fullest realization.

And in that case, I wouldn’t really care what the instructor thought either.

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Work Cited

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