THE WRITING LAB

...FROM THE EDITOR...

The articles you'll find in this month's newsletter tackle problems most of us routinely face. Joyce Kinkead and her staff of tutors offer us options for solving a variety of situational problems that crop up in tutorials; Lisa Birnbaum explores options for balancing the gender gap in tutorial staffs so that more male tutors can be added; Kristin Walker considers ways of working with overly dependent student writers; and Michael Pemberton probes the charge that tutoring "short-circuits" students' learning processes.

These articles should remind us how integral problem-solving is to our work and to our responsibility to keep our writing labs functioning appropriately and effectively. That each of these articles offers not just problems but also very workable—and theoretically sound—solutions and perspectives is a tribute to the creativity and success of our problem-solving abilities. For those of us now beginning the search for new tutors to add to our staffs for next fall, it's also a reminder of how important this ability is as we try to identify the strongest candidates for our staffs.

• *Muriel Harris, editor*

Situations and solutions for tutoring across the curriculum

Although undergraduates in our writing-across-the-curriculum tutoring program—called Rhetoric Associates (RAs)—write several assignments in their training seminar, one has proved especially fruitful and useful.[1] Called "situations and solutions," it is derived from Harris' "Solutions and Trade-Offs in Writing Center Administration," a list of frequent occurrences—most often conflicts—that have no simple answers. Over the course of the term, the WAC tutors keep track of problems and then generate multiple solutions, noting the drawbacks and advantages of each. Typical problems include friction between RAs and professors to whom they are assigned, poorly-written instructions for assignments, difficult papers (e.g., documentation issues, plagiarism, misunderstanding the assignment), and student attitudes affecting conferences. The following examples, developed by the tutors, are part of the handbook used by the novice tutors, who analyze the situations to explore options for tackling conflicts they may encounter and who revise existing situations and add new ones.

A. SITUATIONS THAT FOCUS ON STUDENTS

Situation 1: Punctuation paranoia

At the beginning of a writing conference you ask a student if she has any questions to ask about the paper. The essay has several important problems, including unclear purpose, poor organization, lack of specific detail, and clichés; however, instead of addressing these concerns, the student produces two pages of questions on punctuation and usage in the paper.

Possible solutions and trade-offs:

•Go through the list with the student, helping her to understand grammar and punctuation strategies. This will let the student know that you care about her anxiety, and it may help develop strategies to use in answering these questions in the future. This approach will probably take up most of the conference, preventing a thorough discussion of more global issues and suggesting that it is acceptable to worry about surface errors early in the writing process.

•Discuss some of the questions but move to more important topics quickly, explaining to the writer why such problems are unimportant at this point. This may help her see your willingness to answer her questions and also get her thinking about more issues, such as the point of the paper. It may also indicate to the student that you don't respect her concerns.

•Tell the student frankly that such questions are unimportant now and constitute proofreading, not revision. The writer may be offended, but she also needs to understand a hierarchy of writing concerns.

•Explain that your role as a tutor is to help specifically with global concerns. Note that many of the proofreading errors may disappear in a revised draft. Express willingness to schedule a second conference to discuss surface problems. Mention that the Writing Center is also available for feedback.

•Tell the student that she has good questions and that you will be happy to discuss them at conference's end. This way you focus on more important issues first. The student may feel, though, that her concerns were put off.

Situation 2: Author and authority

After the tutor conference, a student complains to the instructor that his authorship was removed from the essay. The student was expecting someone to correct grammar, check citations, and improve the style. Instead, the writer found the content of the paper questioned, ideas challenged, and a new thesis suggested. He felt violated and frustrated. In response, the instructor drops the requirement for this student to meet with a tutor.

Possible solutions and trade-offs:

•Communication is the key. Request an open forum with all participating professors and tutors to discuss roles. Consistency in the entire program is necessary; on the other hand, the particular professor may miss the point in a large meeting.

•Make sure that you clearly define your role to the professor and students. Ask the students what role they want you to take in analyzing their papers. Negotiate so that those who want help with content receive it and those who merely want their paper polished get proofreading help. Be aware that this approach may reinforce the stereotype of revising as proofreading and tutor as grammar sheriff.

•Do nothing. Some work requires sacrifice. If a student does not want your help, you cannot force it upon her. Perhaps the student will adjust and not feel threatened later.

•Review your log about the conference and the critique. Did you take ownership of the paper? If so, offer to meet with the student, explain, and ask for a second chance. The student may still be hostile, and it could be just one more frustration for you.

Situation 3: The perfect paper

Of the fifteen papers you critique, one seems "on the money," nearly perfect. How can you provide any help?

Possible solutions and trade-offs:

•Compliment the student's work and do nothing else. If you choose this route, the writer may feel that you are wasting her time by not providing helpful insights to show how the paper

can be improved. She may also report to other students that "I didn't get any help from my tutor."

•During the conference, ask the writer what she feels is weak in the paper and go from there. This helps the student evaluate her own writing and places responsibility on the writer. Don't count the writer out and put the entire burden for improving the paper on your shoulders. Good students often know what else they need help with and point the way toward the direction they need. Remember, too, that sometimes good writers hunger to talk about their writing processes.

•Wrack your brain to find anything that the paper could use. You may be nit-picking, but at least the student will feel that you are trying to help her write a better paper.

•Compliment the writing, but be careful to not overdo it. If you tell the student that this is a perfect paper, then she may not attempt any revisions at all, and the instructor may not find it a perfect essay.

Situation 4: Terrible, horrible, very bad papers

Of the fifteen essays you've just read, not one hits the mark. You are so despondent that you feel you cannot comment on any of them without spending hours and depressing the writers. How can you address these major problems in twenty- to thirty-minute sessions?

Possible solutions and trade-offs:
•Do not write everything you want to say on the drafts. Try instead, "Let's talk about structure," which will give you the opening to discuss the problems in the conference without having to write volumes on the papers. Also, this gives them more incentive to show up at their appointments.

•If you schedule your conferences back-to-back, you can consolidate dis-

cussion of common problems. Deal with specific problems first and then ask the next writer to join you to focus on common problems. This should eliminate redundancy in conferences and show students that they are not alone.

•Consult with the instructor and arrange a study group on a particular problem the writers seem to be facing so you can deal with a group.

Situation 5: Undeveloped paper

A student turns in a paper for a critique but doesn't sign up for a conference time. The paper is short, and as you glance over it, you realize it is more an outline than an essay. At the end of the essay, the student has written, "I know what I need to do, it's just a matter of finding time to do it." How responsible are you for this student and his paper?

Possible solutions and trade-offs:
•Writing a critique of the paper/outline may take more time than the writer allotted to it. Your comments would mean essentially you are doing the work the writer should have done. Do not reward him for lack of preparation. Forget about it. If you choose to do so, you may suffer some guilt as you feel some obligation since you are assigned as his tutor.

•Read through the paper and comment on what has been written thus far. At least he put some effort in it. Give the paper back to the instructor since no conference has been arranged. Perhaps your comments will give the writer the guidance and motivation he so obviously needs.

•Return the paper to the instructor with a note attached that when the student finds the time to write a more complete draft, you will be available to comment. This may encourage him to write, but it may also encourage him to take advantage of your generosity and call at the last minute for a conference.

Situation 6: Missed appointments

The professor with whom you work has included a statement that if students miss their writing conferences, they will not be able to reschedule as that puts an unfair burden on the tutor. You agree with this policy in theory until one of the students assigned to you misses the conference, and she is the one who needs the most help; the ideas in the paper are sound and interesting, but the writing lacks organization, wanders, and is riddled with clichés. The following day, the student calls, apologizes, and requests another appointment as she really wants the help.

Possible solutions and trade-offs:
•Refuse to meet with the student. This way you will not challenge the professor's authority, but the student will also miss out on much needed feedback.

•Meet with the student without telling the professor about the missed conference. This approach allows the student to get the help she needs, but it may undermine the professor's authority.

•Contact the professor, explain the situation, and ask if you might bend the rules. The professor will know you respect her. If she agrees, the student will get the needed help; if the professor disagrees, the student will know that you tried.

•When the topic of missed conferences is first discussed early in the term, ask the professor about possible exceptions. She may agree to allow you to decide when it is appropriate to bend the rules. If she is adamant, then you will not have to contact her when a specific situation occurs.

Situation 7: Uncomfortable conferences

A student of the opposite sex makes you feel uncomfortable during the conference when the two of you are alone by moving in closely to you and seeming to

"come onto you."

Possible solutions and trade-offs:
•Tough it out. You meet only twice with this student, and by putting up with it, you save embarrassing explanations to the student that may detract from the focus of the conference: writing.

•Find a way to avoid being alone with the student. Begin conferences with two students or ask a friend to attend the conference and sit close by. Including others may affect the dynamics of the conferences.

•Tell the student directly that you are uncomfortable. In doing so, you may find that what you perceived to be intentional was actually unintended, which may embarrass the student.

•Find another tutor who is the same gender as the student and trade places. This is a short-term solution and may mean the student continues to make inappropriate advances in the future.

•Speak with the professor and ask him to discuss in class appropriate non-sexist behavior when working in small groups. Hope that the student gets the message in this indirect manner.

•Attend on-campus AA/EO workshops to understand how to respond to such uncomfortable situations.

Situation 8: Friends and critiques
One of the students who has been assigned to you is a close friend. You know that he is sensitive to criticism, especially from those close to him. Because he tends to take criticism personally, what might you do to protect your friendship and still ensure that he get the benefits of a tutorial?

Possible solutions and trade-offs:
•Explain the situation to the instructor and ask for him to be assigned to

another tutor. He will still have the tutor's help, and your friendship is preserved. There is a chance though that if you tutored him successfully, it might be the first positive experience with criticism.

•Explain to your friend that during the conference you act as an objective observer and your goal is to help all of the students with whom you work to write better papers, not to tear them down.

•Offer your friend the choice of working with you or another tutor. This approach places the decision with your friend.

•During the conference, emphasize the good in the paper and suggest other parts that could be handled similarly. This may not be the most effective conference, but your friendship will be safe.

Situation 9: Defensive student
A student is defensive from the beginning of the writing conference. Before you can say much, the student asserts that professors "want students to do poorly on their writing assignments, that writing is purely subjective and, therefore, beyond evaluation, and that writing is a gift, not a skill." The paper *is* poorly written and seems to suggest that the writer doesn't care whether anyone can understand it or not.

Possible solutions and trade-offs:
•Tell the student he has a bad attitude and can return when he wants help. This may be the slap-in-the-face the student needs to straighten up, but it may contribute to the bad attitude he already has.

•Listen to the student, trying to understand why he feels the way he does. Ask the student to explain himself, and be patient. Remember that bad experiences with writing teachers previously may have created this attitude,

and you may be the first one to change some of his misconceptions by acting positively. This approach may take more time and patience than you really have to offer and puts aside the issue of the paper.

•Ignore the student's attitude. Continue with the conference, which may help the student realize his writing needs help and really can be improved. With this kind of attitude though, it may be an uphill battle.

B. SITUATIONS WITH PROFESSORS
In our decentralized WAC tutoring program, tutors are assigned to work with specific classes and meet with the instructors before and during the term to lay out ground rules. Each tutor is assigned a maximum of fifteen students with whom to work, first writing a critique of the assignment and then meeting individually with the author.

Situation 1: Timing and revision
The instructor has unreal expectations of the time needed for revision. Although professors participating in the program are told that one to two weeks is an appropriate length for response and revision, Dr. Small expects you to read, evaluate, and meet individually with your assigned students between Tuesday afternoon when you receive the papers and Friday.

Possible solutions and trade-offs:
•Keep your complaints to yourself, stay up all night, and skip classes to finish the task. You may fall behind in your own work, but you avoid confrontation with the instructor; however, staying awake long hours may lead to sloppy critiques, which does not help the writers.

•Explain your concern to Dr. Small. Perhaps she will change the due date, helping future tutors and students in this class. You do run the risk of alienating the professor.

•Turn to your supervisor and explain the situation, asking for mediation. This may be a cop-out. You need to learn how to handle conflict.

Situation 2: Unclear assignments

The assignment instructs students to write a personal essay on why they are attending college. Early in the term, you met with the instructor to discuss the assignments and believed this one to be clearly a personal essay; the instructor said, "they should use critical thinking techniques taught in class to analyze their decision to continue their education." During your conferences, you note that a few students used quotations from readings and lectures, but most have written papers without documentation. After the papers have been evaluated, some of the students who received lower grades approach you and ask why you didn't tell them they needed to document. The instructor thought she had indicated that the papers must contain references to both readings and lectures. What can you do about your frustration when both you and a majority of students felt the instructions were unclear?

Possible solutions and trade-offs:

•Learn from your mistakes. The papers have already been graded, so there is nothing you can do for those students. You are not responsible for the students understanding the assignment; that is the responsibility of the instructor. Make sure you are absolutely clear about the second assignment. If you choose this option, the instructor may continue distributing unclear assignments, and future classes may suffer.

•Approach the instructor and explain tactfully your concern. Tell her you think the assignment was unclear and note how many students did not use documentation. You run the risk of ruining the relationship with the teacher, but on the other hand, this could open the door to a closer working relationship and improve the design of future writing assignments.

•Resort to asking the tutor supervisor for help. Perhaps the teacher will be more open to suggestions from a peer rather than from a student. This does not help you learn to deal with difficult situations.

•Ask the instructor if the students can give you feedback on the writing assignment and the tutor assistance, perhaps using the "one-minute paper" technique. In this way, students anonymously evaluate the assignment, providing data for a conference with the instructor.

•Prepare a handout that will guide future students by detailing the implicit assumptions of the assignment. Give this to other tutors assigned to this same class in future terms and alert the advisor that this is a potential pitfall if the program continues to include this professor.

•Construct a grading rubric by taking the main points of the assignment and classifying them most important to least important. Show this to the teacher to make sure your understanding matches hers. Not only will such a rubric help you in responding uniformly to the papers, it will also clue students into the evaluation standards. The downside of this is that it places emphasis on evaluation, which may block some writers.

Using situations and solutions provides tutors with an opportunity to record and respond to recurring dilemmas. In effect, problems are externalized, and through collaborative problem solving, the tutors come to see multiple options and are empowered by the process. Problems committed to paper become static and open for analysis, illustrating that tutors encounter common frustrations. The sharing of conflict resolution among seminar members helps them move rapidly to become accomplished independent tutors and improve the way they think about communication, problem-solving, and pedagogy.

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[1] For a complete description of the Rhetoric Associates Program, see Kinkead. RAs are assigned to various courses and are the first readers of student papers. Tutoring and revision occur before the professor sees the revised draft.

Works Cited

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Kinkead, Joyce. "Taking Tutoring on the Road: The Rhetoric Associates Program at Utah State University." In *Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies.* Ed. Joyce A. Kinkead and Jeanette Harris. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993. 210-215.

Toward a gender-balanced staff in the writing center

Writing centers typically employ a large percentage of females, which shouldn't surprise us, given that writing centers have grown out of the female-dominated field of composition. What worries me is the possibility of students believing that teaching and writing are women's pursuits, and not men's. We may be sending messages about writing, tutoring, and teaching that we definitely do not intend to send. I believe that the writing center, a place of teaching and learning, is an ideal place to showcase educational models and to advance the importance of our work. We need to suggest that supporting others as they write is the work of admirable women *and* men, evenly represented on the writing center staff. In this way, students and faculty who come in contact with tutors will recognize the role of tutor—and perhaps teacher of writing—as not gender-specific.

Gender imbalance in educational settings can contribute to damaging stereotypes, often affecting choices students make about their interests and careers. Students who don't believe they match the profile will miss the opportunity to be educated through work in the writing center that may lead to teaching or a number of other fields. Business majors, for instance, may not realize that they can develop coaching skills—much touted now in the field of management—from tutoring in the writing center. Imagine the impression it would make on students and faculty to see male business majors listening, questioning, and assisting other students in the unglamorous process of learning to write well.

It may sound anti-feminist to build a case for drawing more males into the writing center, though I want to show that the effect ought to strengthen the image of women, and not through attachment to or legitimation by male power. By demonstrating the value of tutoring writing for any student, we can remove some of the associations with inappropriate or negative images of women and draw attention to characteristics of humane interaction in learning.

I have directed The University of Tampa's writing center for almost five years. In that period I have hired 18 tutors, only four of them male. Our writing center has six undergraduate tutors staffing it each semester, and the number of male tutors on the staff has never exceeded two at one time. We often have only one male tutor, which is not reflective of our male to female ratio at the University (or, incidentally, of faculty teaching comp).

Though I was aware of the disparity early on, even in my first year, and tutors mentioned the need for more male tutors (mainly for tutees with a preference, as I recall it), I carried on without a concerted effort to change my hiring procedure. I wrote the same memo to composition faculty asking for names of students who wrote well and worked effectively with other students in response groups. I made a special note about recommending sophomores or even second-semester freshmen so I could get them early and keep them long, but I never asked for both female and male students. I thought it was obvious that I was asking for any

student meeting those requirements, and I felt it would be sexist to specify gender.

This past year, when the issue of gender began to haunt me, I asked a male friend of mine in the English department why he thought I wasn't getting any names of males from comp teachers. His response surprised me: he said he guessed he was thinking of females when I sent around that memo, since he sees tutors in the writing center as female. He also said he looks for a "nurturing type" when I ask, and he sends along his usual list of names of females.

A list of traits one can easily amass from literature about writing centers makes the source of the problem clear: my list included empathetic, patient, sensitive, diplomatic, friendly, intuitive, supportive, responsive, and caring. We want tutors to possess traits that females are more likely to project, most of us having been socialized to be *dream tutors*. Besides the "good student profile" that includes a high grade point average, faculty recommendations, and a writing sample, we want students to have personal qualities that correspond to the skills needed for successful tutoring.

Males do not necessarily respond less well in groups or write with less competence or care less about helping other students; it seems more likely that stereotypes perpetuate gender imbalance. Still, research such as Nancy Chodorow's shows that boys and girls have different capacities in relating to others that come from relationships with mothers and fathers, and that young men

have had to reject what is feminine in order to define themselves as masculine. Many of the traits listed above, that males might see in female tutors or have difficulty with in response groups, could steer them away from thinking about tutoring.

I believe male students tutor equally well, when trained. I certainly have women who need training just as much as men; as with any work, although a few will be naturals, most will need guided practice. I have worked with too few male tutors to make judgments perhaps, but I have seen a full range of talents and problems in those I have employed.

It may be that many male students could benefit especially from learning to nurture, empathize, and serve others in the writing center, since they may have not had as much practice or encouragement along these lines. And when men and women on the staff are pleasant, their behavior will be seen as typical of a tutor, not a female! I think there is an assumption that a tutor is nice because she's female, instead of nice because she is professionally trained to facilitate growth in writers. I hope that the evidence of expertise will be easier to discern when gender is not confusing the issue.

The appearance of gender bias may distract clients and others from our purposes. If the writing center is to deliver the right message, it must be perceived as being a place for all students, all kinds of writers, and all kinds of writing projects. If gender is associated with our work, for example, writing centers may be linked with remediation (almost all the academic support services are run by women at my university). And women working in writing centers may be seen as maternal rather than nurturing, giving

too much help as opposed to the gentle support that characterizes good tutoring. Stereotypes about what women can do and how we do it are pervasive and limiting: feminizing all of the purposes and activities of the writing center—writing, teaching, collaborating, supporting—is not in our interest.

Some might argue that gender shouldn't be an issue at all. But the trend is away from ignoring difference, and our efforts to be gender-blind or color-blind were, while perceived as fair and free of bias, not capable of addressing diversity among people. Where gender is relevant, such as in meeting the needs of students' learning styles or language use, it should matter. Gender should matter to writing center directors—so that it *doesn't* matter to students when it is *not* relevant.

We are in the luxurious position of being able to afford to encourage men's participation in work that has become widely applicable preparation for a number of fields. We can move beyond what could be viewed as protectionist, early-stage advancement in an academic area we dominate, and welcome men. When we do, we will stand to gain in the short and long terms, with small and large messages about what a writing center can do. We must begin with students, who are at the university to learn about their potential. The writing center offers an especially ideal opportunity for future teachers, but for *any* student a teaching experience can offer many kinds of learning, not the least of which might be the recognition that helping others behind the scenes is great work.

I came across an article in the paper

the other day about a female high school football player whose dream it was to compete in a male-dominated pursuit. I found myself wishing to hear a young male writer say, "My dream is to compete for a position in the female-dominated writing center at my university." I know, it sounds silly, and I have an even more implausible revision: My dream is to teach in a gender-balanced workplace, to work in a field that has grown out of theory and practice shaped by women and men who care about how writers learn best.

I don't want to make light of my dream or impose too much gravity on this topic, so I will close with my plans for a small but crucial change in my hiring. My spring memo is going to be different. I'm going to list the benefits of tutoring writing for students outside English or English education—like coaching skills for management majors and communication skills for pre-med. And I'm sending this call for recommendations to all faculty. I hope that without one word about gender, I'll get a balanced list of candidates I can interview, and from which I can select a gender-balanced staff. It's a place to start.

> I think there is an assumption that a tutor is nice because she's female, instead of nice because she is professionally trained to facilitate growth in writers.

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Work Cited

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Resources for Tutors' Reading

The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors. Edited by Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood. New York: St. Martin's, 1995, paperbound, 116 pages. (To receive an examination copy, call 1-800-446-8923, fax at 212-780-0115, or write in on a college letterhead to College Desk, St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.)

This collection reprints eleven articles that originally appeared in the Writing Ce*nter Journal,* the *Writing Lab Newsletter,* and *College English.* The readings are grouped under four headings: "Theoretical Constructs," "Interpersonal Dynamics," "Responding to Texts," and "Affirming Diversity. " The editors also include an introduction entitled "The Tutoring Process" (covering the stages of tutoring, developing an informed practice, and a look at the paradigms of writing instruction) and a final section of "Resources for Further Inquiry" (including journals, books, the National Writing Center Association, and videotapes).

The Master Tutor: A Guidebook for More Effective Tutoring. By Ross B. MacDonald. Williamsville, NY: Cambridge Stratford Study Skills Institute, 1994. paperbound, 124 pages. (Order from The Cambridge Stratford Study Skills Institute, 8560 Main Street, Williamsville, NY 14221, 1-800-466-2232).

This book is designed either for training sessions (with interactive exercises) or as a stand-alone self-instructional curriculum for tutors in various disciplines. The chapters, described as offering a research-based tutor training model, discuss "The Tutoring Role," "The Tutor Cycle," "The Tutoring Options," "The Tutoring Patterns," and "Tutoring Multiculturally." Tutor Guidebooks are $12.95, a Trainer's Manual is also available for $64.95, and a set of transparencies is $85. There are also optional evaluation instruments, validation services, and training seminars and programs.

National Peer Tutoring in Writing Conference

Call for Proposals
October 27-29, 1995
Muncie, Indiana
"The Ideal and the Real: Peer Tutoring Challenges"

Proposals are to be submitted on proposal forms. Send for proposal form and address program inquiries to Kevin Davis, Writing Center, East Central University, Ada, OK 74820 (405-332-8000, ext. 442; e-mail: kdavis@mailclerk.ecok.edu). Proposal deadline: May 1, 1995; invitations sent by May 31. For inquiries about facilities, contact Cindy Johanek, Writing Center, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana 47306 (317-285-8535; e-mail: 00cljohanek@bsuvc.bsu.edu).

Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association

October 21, 1995
Seattle, Washington
"Mediating Differences: Writing Centers and Contrary Expectations"

The conference theme encourages participants to consider the service expectations that writing centers must negotiate. Write to the Seattle University Writing Center, ATTN: 1995 PCWCA, English Department, Seattle University, Broadway and Madison, Seattle, WA 98122-4460 (e-mail: suwcenter@seattleu.edu), or call Larry Nichols, SU Writing Center Director: 206-296-5309.

ᏆUTORS' COLUMN

Tutoring days

I only applied to work at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Writing/Reading Center so one of my professors would stop bugging me about it. Really. I didn't know what went on at the Writing Center. Well, except tutoring—and I wasn't even sure what happened in a tutoring session. And I certainly didn't think it would help me with my social life or my school work. I figured I'd just put in my nine hours a week and collect my three credits at semester's end. I strolled in and spoke to the director with my professor's ego-boosting message in the back of my mind: "You'll be a wonderful tutor. Trust me. You'll love it." Yea, right.

Well, five semesters and two summers later, I've finally left the Writing Center. Did I love it? You bet. But more importantly, did the work experience help me? More than I could ever tell you. But since I'm here anyway, let me try.

As a freshman commuting student, I went to class and then home. I had a few friends in English, political science and my other classes, but I really didn't feel like I was a part of the university community. Instead, I was just "taking classes." I found that working at the WRC gave me not only a base of operations that made me feel like I had someplace to go, but it also gave me a chance to meet new people. I had originally assumed that if I didn't have a student to tutor, I'd just do my homework. What I wound up doing, however, was talking with both experienced and other new tutors. I got advice from the former, reassurance from the latter, and close friends from both. As obvious as this sounds, let

me say it anyway: Don't stick your nose in a book; talk to other people who have "free" time at work. And don't wait for other tutors to approach you—think of a stupid question and ask it. Believe me: the tutor you approach has been in the same situation you're in now. Honest!

During my freshman—and only undergraduate WRC—year, my grades were only average. (I guess if you got right down to it, you could even say below average.) I learned (quickly) that the writing center is a resource not only for students sent in by instructors, but for the staff as well. I remember having the hardest time starting a paper on *Macbeth*. I'd spent weeks trying to get my ideas organized into something concrete. I'd written countless introductory paragraphs, only to crumple them up and toss them in the trash. As I sat with a group of tutors before a workshop, I mentioned the difficulty I was having with that dreaded paper. The four other people switched into tutor mode and helped me focus. After I finished my second draft, I asked another tutor to look it over for me to see if the essay was clear and detailed enough. He made some suggestions; I took them and wound up with an A. The moral of this story: Don't be afraid to utilize the center's resources—even if they happen to be your friends.

Now, as a graduate student in the Professional Writing Program, I'm teaching Freshman English. I question how I would have handled my classes if I didn't have tutoring experience. At the WRC I listened to hundreds of students discuss the methods that teachers use

(good and bad), so I know at least a few things to avoid (like reading from a textbook for an entire period).

I also use some of those tutoring techniques in the classroom. If a student questions something, oftentimes I'll redirect the question to the class. This usually gets a discussion on the topic going. I believe that students can learn from each other's experiences; they are also more apt to remember information if it comes from a peer rather than an instructor droning on (not that *I* drone, mind you) about theory. Even if you don't choose teaching as a profession, the "people skills" (especially listening to and working with others) you acquire from tutoring will benefit you once you get a "real" job.

I guess the point of all this is to let you know that working in a writing center will make a difference in your university career and beyond. If someone had told me that, I wouldn't have believed them. But you already knew that, didn't you?

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Difficult clients and tutor dependency: Helping overly dependent clients become more independent writers

Darren first came to the writing center at Midlands Technical College last spring semester. After sitting down with Darren and asking him what he was working on, I was happy to see that Darren was very open and talkative about the paper he had just gotten back from his English instructor. The last page of the paper was branded with a large, red *F*, and faulty organization, subject/verb disagreement, and comma splices were the culprits. "I have to revise this paper in order to get a better grade," Darren said to me. "I *have got* to do better in this class. I just can't fail it!" I understood Darren's desperation, and I began reading his paper. After I had finished reading the paper, I made a few general comments about ways to improve the paper's organization. Then, I went to help another student, saying to Darren as I left that I would check back with him a little later to see how he was progressing.

As I helped the other student at a nearby desk, I could see Darren out of the corner of my eye writing and erasing, writing and erasing. The second I stood up from helping the other student, Darren summoned me. "I can't think of what to say." He was trying to formulate a thesis. "Why don't you list a few points and then make a sentence that states how you will cover those points?" I suggested. "I tried," he replied, "but Dr. Smith says we can't start sentences with *I* or *there*, and I can't think of any other way to start." I responded by listing some ways to write a thesis without using those words, just to show him that it was possible to write a thesis without *I* or *there*. "What was the second option you mentioned?" Darren asked. He was trying to copy my every word. "Your thesis should be in your own words," I protested. "Well, I just need some help getting started," Darren said. "I've been

out of school for a long time, and it's so hard to know how to start."

I became very frustrated with Darren because he wanted me to be with him every step of the way as he was writing his paper. I knew that simply ignoring Darren or refusing to help him would not solve any of his problems; he would have to learn to work on his own writing with limited guidance from me. Darren continued to pressure me by asking me to suggest specific ways he could revise the grammar and punctuation errors out of his paper. When I intentionally gave him general answers so he could take care of his specific errors himself, he grew impatient and panicked, especially when he saw that the writing center was getting busier and busier and that I was less able to give him my undivided attention. When I would try to help him with one problem, he would listen to only half of my suggestion before jumping on to the next area of concern.

After attempting to help several students like Darren and listening to the other tutors talking about their frustrating encounters with them, I realized these students had several characteristics in common beyond their overdependency. First, these students tended to be ones coming back to school after a long absence and seemed to be unaware of the kind of writing skills (using clear organization, standard English, and critical thinking) their instructors were looking for. Second, these students feared they would fail in their efforts at returning to school, and third, as a result of that fear, these students were powerfully motivated to do well. These characteristics, produced students who might cling desperately to a person or people who could help them succeed. Before recommending what writing center directors should pass on to their tutors to help these stu-

dents, I would like to draw attention to a recent discussion in writing center theory that will put my analysis of overdependency in perspective.

The current issue in writing center theory doesn't seem to be whether clients should be independent or dependent but how dependent they should be. In a recent *Writing Lab Newsletter* article, Dave Healy points out the harmful effects of the clinic/hospital metaphors on definitions of writing centers' purpose. He notes that even though writing center theory has abolished those metaphors, the fact that writing centers see their purpose as making clients independent supports the ideology behind the clinic metaphors. Clients who need the writing center are "ill" and require its services; clients who are "well" do not need the center and are independent of it (1-2). Healy goes on to say that, in the past, even writing center theorists such as Mary Croft and Irene Clark have emphasized the need for writing center clients' independence (2) and that this myth of independency counteracts the reality that writers need other writers for feedback on writing. He says:

> Few teachers of composition would argue with the claim that academic success depends upon a certain resourcefulness or the ability to work independently. But getting feedback on one's writing does not constitute a state of deprivation that the developing writer will eventually outgrow. . . . [T]o suggest that a place where talk about writing occurs is not a place for the linguistically independent reflects an impoverished understanding about the nature of writing and writers (3).

Healy obviously believes that there should not be such a concept as a totally

independent writer because that concept flies in the face of theories supported by Andrea Lunsford, Peter Elbow, Ira Shor, Lisa Ede, Kenneth Bruffee, and others who promote the importance of other writers at some point in the writing process. What Healy only touches on, however, is what to do about finding a balance between dependency and independency. He says:

> Writers who find in the writing center a haven may need to be challenged to become more self-directed and proactive. The challenge for the writing center is not, however, to work itself out of a job, but rather to redefine the jobs that need to be done; not to wean writers from the center, but instead to provide nourishment for writers at various stages of development; not to cure people of their writing illnesses, but to infect them with the bug to collaborate (3).

Healy's three recommendations—redefining jobs that the writing center should do, providing nourishment for writers, infecting clients with the bug to collaborate—suggest ways of finding balance between independency and dependency. Using these suggestions, I will list possible "plans of action" writing center directors can promote to tutors dealing with difficult clients who are unable to find that balance themselves.

Redefining Jobs

Most writing center directors would agree that it is not the writing center's job to hold clients' hands throughout the entire writing process, guiding them and giving them specific answers to their questions so that the tutors end up doing clients' work for them. Since this philosophy is acceptable, the focus then moves to *how* do we as writing center directors practically redefine jobs that the writing center does? One important way is by concentrating on receiving more information from students instead of giving it. James Upton in "Beyond Correctness: Context Based Response from the Writing Center" presents a way for clients to give themselves and tutors information on the writing assignment

through a Writing Assignment Worksheet (page 13). This Worksheet "is designed to help students better understand each specific assignment and the writing process and improve their critical thinking skills by having them think about, write about, and talk about the specific assignment and content BEFORE they actual [sic] write the paper" (13). Although Upton stresses using the Worksheet before writing, it can also be used for revising/rethinking a paper.

Tutors can be instructed about the benefits of using the Worksheet (or a modification of it) to gain information from the students about specific assignments; then, tutors should present the Worksheet to students seeking help, going over the Worksheet with them so that there won't be confusion about how to complete it. Tutors should later read over the completed Worksheet to obtain as much information as possible about the students' assignments before helping them. It will not be necessary for *all* students to complete the Worksheet because not all students will be working on major writing assignments; however, those students working on papers should be required to complete the Worksheet before receiving tutorial assistance. By implementing tools such as the Worksheet in their writing centers, writing center directors can redefine the jobs of the writing center to focus more on gaining information instead of mostly giving it.

Providing Nourishment for Writers

Healy's suggestion to provide nourishment for writers at various stages of development (3) can be implemented with this type of overly dependent client through the help of the Writing Assignment Worksheets by helping these clients learn to become more self-sufficient; however, once tutors gain the information from the worksheets, they also need to verbally nourish and interact with clients through verifying and encouraging. First, tutors need to be instructed in the process of verification, making sure the answers the client puts down on the worksheet are accurate ones. Sometimes, difficult clients may

rush through the sheet in order to receive tutorial assistance faster because they are unwilling to do work on their own, and other clients may have misunderstood some of the information prompts on the sheet and need to discuss the questions with a tutor (for example, some clients may not understand the term *audience* or may be having trouble deciding who the audience should be). Depending on the Worksheet questions writing centers choose to implement, they should also design a list of some verifying questions tutors can ask clients about the Worksheets if necessary.

Tutors can provide nourishment for these writers also by encouraging them. Oftentimes, one reason why these clients are so dependent is that they are insecure about their writing and their ability to write. Offering encouragement such as, "It looks like you understand the assignment" or "You have identified your audience well" helps these clients realize they can accomplish writing tasks on their own.

Another way to nourish writers who have reached the editing stage in the writing process is teaching them to become more self-sufficient by editing their own papers. Sometimes, these difficult clients may demand help only for editing concerns like grammar and punctuation. Because some instructors at Midlands Technical College deduct large numbers of points off students' papers for grammar errors (some fail a paper if it contains one comma splice or fragment), we see clients in the writing center who want tutors to point out their every error and tell them how to correct it. I have had clients ask me to proofread their papers several times to make sure they have corrected all the errors. If tutors comply with these clients' demands, the writing center appears to be a proofreading service and fix-it shop; plus, clients become increasingly dependent on the writing center for skills they should be able to replicate on their own.

There are ways, however, to avoid falling into such traps. Edward Vavra recommends a way for students to edit their

own papers using their own writing. Vavra states that "traditional" methods of improving grammar such as studying definitions or completing exercises do not work because they tend to focus on one error at a time: subject/verb disagreement, vague pronoun reference, etc. According to Vavra, when the students look at their own papers, they're not sure which errors to look for since there probably will be a variety of them in their papers. Vavra says, "[the] students' problem is often not in *correcting* the error, but in *recognizing* it" (6).

The sequential grammar system that Vavra recommends begins with students' being able to identify prepositional phrases by putting parentheses around them. Once that step is completed, the students label subjects, verbs, and simple complements. Vavra says:

> With prepositional phrases visually set off in parentheses, students are forced to find the syntactic, and not just semantic, subject of the verb. I have watched many students underline the subjects and verbs in their own writing, and I have seen many of them correcting errors in agreement as they did so, even though they were not told to correct errors; others automatically added previously omitted '-ed' inflexions (9).

Instead of tutors' saying, "You have a subject/verb agreement error here," the errors are never identified as errors; the students, once they have identified parts of their sentences, recognize what needs to be changed on their own. "This system teaches students what is considered right, not what is wrong," Vavra emphasizes (10).

The next step is identifying subordinate clauses, a process that should eliminate fragments, run-ons, and comma splices. Finally, students identify gerunds and therefore eliminate dangling and misplaced modifiers. Vavra says that some students may need a review of punctuation rules so that they won't have comma splices simply because they do not know they need a semi-colon be-

tween two sentences instead of a comma. Overall, though, students take control of editing their texts (once they know how the sequential, syntactic tutorial operates), and they work with their own writing, focusing on corrections that need to be made in their writing individually. In addition, Vavra says:

> [T]hese four steps are not only sequential, but also *cumulative*: whenever a student starts working with a new text, he begins with prepositional phrases and takes the steps in order. The tutor can decide how quickly a student should pass from one step to the next as well as how many of the steps the student needs to do. There is, for example, no pressing reason to do step four if the student has no trouble with dangling modifiers (11).

Vavra also mentions that the format of the syntactic tutorial can also be applied to stylistics by identifying main ideas and varying sentence structure by changing forms of words (13).

Implementing this kind of system for clients who have reached the editing stage in the writing process spans Healy's recommendations both for redefining jobs and providing nourishment for writers by having tutors strongly resist the proofreading role and help writers become more self-sufficient. Although clients may resent taking the time to label parts of their sentences, they will soon be able to perform the process more quickly, and they will be able to correct their own errors in papers as well as in essay tests and in-class writing assignments which students cannot bring to the writing center. In addition, since most writing centers probably do not promote proofreading students' papers and identifying every error, tutors will no longer have to deal with the frustration of looking at a paper with numerous types of errors and not knowing where to begin. By using handouts outlining Vavra's procedures and by having tutors briefly discuss the system with clients, writing center directors can almost completely redefine the writing-center-as-proofreader mentality (still prevalent among

students and faculty who are unaware of writing center/composition theory) to the writing center as facilitator of self-help and learning strategies.

One point to emphasize is that this syntactic tutorial *should not* be used as a substitution for revision. This system should be implemented much later in the writing process when clients have already addressed organization, coherence, audience, etc. The syntactic tutorial (as Vavra presents it) should be used for editing concerns.

Fostering Collaboration

By saying tutors can help nourish dependent clients, I am not implying that the tutor is all-knowing and is bestowing encouraging comments from a superior position in order to manipulate the client into believing (perhaps mistakenly) that

he/she possesses the ability to be a successful writer. True nourishment comes in part as a result of collaboration, collaboration that is neither overly critical nor insincerely flattering. Because there may not be other students in the writing center working on the same assignment, the tutor becomes a collaborator.

In order to assist in facilitating the collaboration process, Upton presents a "Reader Evaluation Sheet" (on this page), which the tutor can use to respond to the client's writing. (The Sheet is designed to be used when evaluating a completed paper; however, the Sheet can be modified to assist with prewriting as well.) Upton, who says this Sheet is a written model taken from Bill Lyons' "Praise-Question-Polish" model of responding to writing, recommends that the reader read the student's whole paper first before responding. He also says that the comments should be "as specific and positive as possible" (21). Writing center directors need to guide tutors in how best to utilize these sheets; tutors could practice using them on sample student papers or on their own writing. Tutors can also practice using samples of students' papers at various stages of revision in order to learn how the Sheet can provide different feedback on those stages. As clients revise, some parts of the paper may become more effective, and other parts that have been added may need clarification. All sections of the sheet may not be appropriate when evaluating every draft; for example, tutors probably won't focus too heavily on section six of the Sheet if the client has brought in only a rough draft.

In addition, Upton lists some other benefits to using the Sheet for collaboration:

    a. The sheet provides a more permanent response to student works, and many students keep the Sheet as a reference as they work to improve their writing.

    b. Students can be asked to complete a Sheet about their own specific work or body or [sic] works to help develop their

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Writing Assignment Worksheet
(Adapted from Upton)

This sheet is a suggested guide to help you with your major writing assignments. Write or think the "answers" in *your* own words.

Name: _____

Subject: _____

Paper due date: _____

Assignment: (a) Formal assignment (what the teacher/textbook says):
               (b) Assignment in *my* words:
               (Double-check my understanding of the assignment with the teacher.)

Audience (To whom am I writing this?):

Intention (What do I want to accomplish in this paper?):

Length required:

Evaluative criteria (How will my paper be graded?):

Special notes or instructions about the paper:

Background information needed?

What kind(s) of sources?

Where can I find this information?

When can I work on this paper?

Possible pre-writing activities:
        (A) Class activities:
        (B) Own activities:

Can I work with others on this paper?

With whom?

When?

After pre-writing activities and thinking, what are the major ideas I want to
        share in this paper?

Writing self-diagnosis/improvement (What writing skills do I want to work on
        in this paper?):

Reader Evaluation Sheet
(adapted from Upton)

Author's name: _____   Title of paper: _____

Audience for paper: _____   Intention/purpose:_____

Draft number: _____

Evaluation criteria (How will paper be graded?): _____

Reader's Name: _____   Date: _____

I. Describe the structure of my paper. How do the beginning and ending
        work?

II. What parts of my paper do you like? What parts are most effective?

III. What parts do you *see* most? What is the *one* best part of my paper?

IV. What questions do you have about my paper? What parts are not clear?

V. What suggestions do you have to improve my revision of this paper?

VI. Please circle the items which detract from the readability of my paper:

        mechanics   word choice   transitions
        grammar   sentence variety   spelling
        usage   vivid/precise wording

VII. Thank you for reading and responding to my paper. Please make any additional comments about my paper and my ideas on the back of this sheet. I hope to discuss my paper with you before I begin my next draft.

own self-assessment skills.
c. The student can complete the sections of the Sheet in his/her own words during a conference with the [tutor] (21-22).

Upton stresses that this sheet does not take the place of actual writing processes, and it does not eliminate the need for oral interaction (22); rather, it is a tool to assist in collaboration. By emphasizing the need for collaboration for clients at all stages of writing development, writing center directors can truly banish the ideology that independent writers don't need the writing center. At the same time, directors can help discourage overdependency by having clients and tutors use worksheets when collaborating.

There is no panacea for overly dependent writers. There are ways for difficult clients to abuse the systems Upton and Vavra present by demanding constant tutorial assistance. One process that may be necessary is to compose a list of your writing center's philosophies and operating procedures (including points such as "Writing center tutors are here to help you learn, not to do your work for you" and "The writing center will not function as a proofreading or editing service by identifying every error and correcting it) to give to students before they receive assistance. You may even want to go so far as to have clients sign the paper as an indication that they understand the terms by which the writing center operates; then, if an overly dependent client becomes difficult, the tutor could point out the list, indicating that the writing center can assist him/her in many ways but that it is the tutors'/writing center director's responsibility to make sure writing center services are not abused.

By following Healy's recommendations to redefine writing center jobs, provide nourishment for writers, and infect clients with the collaboration bug through implementing the worksheets and programs discussed here, writing center directors and tutors can begin to help overly dependent clients like

Darren. In addition, clients will begin to sense what writers are: not people who must gain information from tutors in order to become self-sufficient writers in the future, but collaborators willing to give information to tutors as well as receive it, take the time to learn from and change their own writing, and accept feedback on their writing during the various stages of development. Clients will then leave the writing center with the sense that their efforts and feedback from others both make a difference in their writing instead of leaving with the idea that the writing center exists to do their writing for them.

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Joining WCenter

WCenter is an electronic forum for writing center specialists hosted by Texas Tech University. The forum was started in 1991 by Lady Falls Brown, writing center director, and is managed by Fred Kemp, director of composition. If you have access to the Internet or Bitnet, you can subscribe to the group by sending e-mail as follows:

send to:
listproc@unicorn.acs.ttu.edu

(no subject line)

message:subscribe wcenter <your name>

If you have problems, send e-mail to Fred Kemp at ykfok@ttacs.ttu.edu

Call for Nominations for NWCA Executive Board Members

Alan Jackson is currently taking nominations for election to the National Writing Centers Association Executive Board. According to NWCA records, nominations are needed to replace three at-large representatives and one high school representative. Please send nominations along with a brief biographical note to Alan Jackson, DeKalb College, 2101 Womack Road, Dunwoody, GA 30338 (404-551-3207).

$\mathcal{W}$RITING CENTER ETHICS

Teaching, Learning, and Problem-Solving

As in my last few columns, I'm going to continue my discussion of the "Top Ten Reasons Why Writing Centers are Unethical." Up for review this month is reason #6:

6) Writing centers are unethical because they short-circuit a student's learning process. Even if tutors don't write students' papers for them, the help tutors provide gives students quick, easy answers to problems 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.

The central argument of this critique seems, on the surface, to make sense, and it makes an especially poignant kind of sense to those of us who think of writing as a cognitive, problem-solving activity. It punches all the right buttons: writing tasks present special "problems" for writers, and writers try to solve those problems by bringing a wide variety of cognitive and rhetorical strategies to bear. By confronting new writing problems in new contexts, writers must think about how to shape rhetorical goals for their developing texts. They must experiment with language, draw from their own memories, generate material, develop plans, try out familiar rhetorical strategies, invent new strategies to meet new circumstances, reach impasses, and then find ways around those impasses. Ideally, they discover what works rhetorically, what doesn't, and why. In short, they learn how to write.

An even more persuasive aspect of this argument, perhaps, is the fact that it dovetails rather nicely with the hands-on, give-the-students-a-real-life-kind-of-problem-and-make-them-grapple-with-it approach to education which has become extremely popular in high schools, colleges, and universities over the last decade or so. At many universities, the culmination of a course of study in engineering is the "capstone" project which requires students to address and design solutions to "real" engineering problems and, by doing so, learn what it's like to think like engineers. Internship programs, too, have this philosophy at heart. They place students in positions where they are expected to hone their developing professional skills and solve "real" problems that are likely to arise in their future careers —be they journalists, teachers, farmers, or computer programmers. Students tend to see these activities as extremely meaningful, rate the quality of their experiences very highly, and frequently claim they learn more about their field or discipline than they would have in a more traditional lecture/discussion/laboratory course. I, myself, can't deny I learned almost everything I know about computers from having had to figure out—on more occasions than I like to recall—why my home computer wasn't working like it should.

If we accept all this, if we all agree that there are clear educational benefits to the types of focused problem-solving described here, then why should we deny these benefits to students who are working on writing tasks? Why should we allow writing centers to deny students the opportunity to learn for themselves?

These are, of course, almost purely

rhetorical questions because in point of fact, the questions themselves are meaningless. Writing centers do not deny students this opportunity; they never have. The same sort of argument could easily be made against teachers who lecture to their students and provide content information that could just as easily be found in the library. Are these teachers short-circuiting their students' learning? Wouldn't these students learn more about doing research and mastering the subject-matter if they had to discover it for themselves? In this respect, the case could be made that writing centers actually do far less to circumvent student learning processes than do conventional teachers. Tutors don't lecture; they ask questions. Tutors don't give students a narrow range of topics to write about; they suggest a wide range of options. Tutors don't expect students to blandly repeat material from lectures and readings in essay exams; they encourage students to reflect upon readings, to synthesize information, and to create new knowledge as they write. Let me ask you: Where is real learning taking place? Who is short-circuiting whom?

My point here is not to elevate writing centers at the expense of other types of instruction. I engage in this sort of rhetorical play to make a point. Just because a pedagogy is different from what is considered—for want of a better term—the "norm," it should not be considered inferior or harmful or dangerous or even suspect. It is merely different. Just because writing centers work closely with students on specific texts, that does not mean that they "give away the answers" (whatever that means) or cut off opportunities for student learning or make the students' writing tasks that

much easier. Experience shows me that just the opposite is true: students may leave a writing conference with a better idea of what they want to accomplish in a paper, but they've still got a lot of work—and a lot of problem solving —to do in order to get there.

Since I began this column with a cognitive perspective, I should probably end it that way as well. Writing centers, I believe, provide clear, observable cognitive benefits to students through the assistance they provide. They support, rather than replace, the problem-solving activities that are crucial to the education of a successful writer. If we accept the fundamental principles of a cognitive framework for writing processes—that writers draw from previous writing experiences to help them shape plans and goals for current writing tasks; that they utilize content information and rhetorical strategies stored in their long term memories

to solve writing problems; that their ability to address increasingly complicated and challenging writing tasks with success is at least partially dependent upon their ability to draw from a diverse and complex repertoire of stored writing plans—then writing centers seem ideally suited to enhance these processes. In conferences, tutors can share their own writing experiences with students and model how they solved difficult writing tasks of their own. By doing so, they add to the students' experience and provide them with new writing strategies they can add to their own repertoires. By helping students to describe, represent, and understand the nature of the writing tasks before them, tutors provide students with the means to discover solutions and to uncover strategies that are likely to be successful.

Tutors model processes, stimulate thought, offer new writing strategies,

help students to generate new content, promote analysis of texts, ask pointed questions, and still require students to do most of the work and all of the writing.

Sounds like teaching to me.

Students try out new processes, think critically, enact (and remember) new writing strategies, generate new content, analyze texts, answer questions, and work hard at their writing.

Sounds like learning to me.

And forgive me if I'm wrong, but it's hard to see either one of these activities as inherently unethical.

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