

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 19, Number 9

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

May, 1995

...FROM THE EDITOR...

The conversation in this month's newsletter is particularly enriched by many tutors' contributions. We hear them discussing their work with students across the disciplines, offering questions for our Question Exchange, writing our Tutors' Column, and authoring essays in a book collection. Tutors' perceptions are an important part of our conversation, and another group we ought to be listening to are the students with whom we work. I wonder why their voices so rarely enter the discussion. What insights might they offer us?

Also included in this month's newsletter is an order form (finally!) for the Index to the last nineteen years worth of *Writing Lab Newsletter* articles. Please feel free to make copies of the form as needed.

In the Index order form, we've tried to offer the option of choosing either hard copy printouts or computer disks in a variety of forms and sorted in a variety of ways to meet a variety of your needs and interests. But if the form got too complicated in the process, please send us your questions. (We might even have some answers.)

• Muriel Harris, editor

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Teaching creative writing in writing centers

As the University of Wyoming Writing Center expands to meet the needs of the University's writing across the curriculum program, it is becoming what Alan Devenish defines as a "true center of writing on campus" (6). If those divisions are questioned and ultimately removed, writing centers can become a vital resource for creative writers.

Our writing center recently became aware of the need to expand its services and resources to meet the challenge of working with creative writers, whose needs differ from those of the typical writing center conferee. Most writers with whom we conference are responding to assigned purposes and audiences. They are engaged in academic writing that will be evaluated by a teacher. In contrast, self-motivated creative writers not enrolled in creative writing classes bring to us projects that were not assigned and that will not be evaluated by a teacher. Our Writing Center has developed two forums for working with creative writers. We offer a two-hour weekly creative writing workshop, free and open to the community. We also invite creative writers to participate in the

traditional one-to-one half-hour conferences. Described here are strategies specifically for creative writing workshops and individual conferences wherein the writing center faculty member is neither a passive audience praising a piece of writing nor an editor "fixing" it. Included in this discussion is my experience with three creative writers whose weekly writing center conferences helped define these strategies. Also included are some basic resources that might

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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.

help writing centers develop or expand their services for creative writers.

Our goal for all Writing Center conferences is to provide writers with an audience, often one different from that designated by an assignment, to suggest revision strategies, and to help writers become self-sufficient. For creative writers, Writing Center faculty are often their *only* audience. And because many creative writers who visit our Writing Center have never taken a creative writing course, they are not accustomed to criticism that questions their purpose, form, subject, and language. Writing center faculty have no assignment to refer these writers to, no guidelines for content and format, and certainly no mutual criteria for discussing the strengths and weaknesses of creative writing. Furthermore, writing center faculty may feel more uneasy suggesting revisions to creative writers than to academic writers who are typically responding to assigned tasks and following standard rules of purpose, thesis, paragraphing, and grammar. Many beginning creative writers view their craft as free from all standard rules of composition and the English language, which makes our task even more difficult.

Our Writing Center developed a creative writing workshop to accommodate a dramatic increase in the number of creative writers using the Writing Center. In turn, the workshop has attracted more creative writers. Our Writing Center's expanded services, in conjunction with the University's writing across the curriculum program, also contribute to the increase. Ironically, as the Writing Center becomes more visible to people writing *within* various disciplines, it attracts writers seeking an audience for writing *outside* their field. Although we do not offer other kinds of open workshops which invite writers with individual needs and projects to read and discuss their writing in a heterogeneous group, the forum is appropriate for creative writers who seek a community in which to share self-motivated writing.

The workshop is a two-hour weekly meeting of creative writers, some of whom are enrolled in creative writing courses but most of whom are not. Its purpose is to provide these writers with a forum for sharing and critiquing their works-in-progress with the guidance of an experienced creative writer on the Writing Center faculty. In response to a group's needs and requests, the writing center facilitator may invite group discussion for the entire two hours or may reserve the second hour for individual conferences.

The workshop is conducted very much like a creative writing class in which students read their writing aloud and critique each other's drafts. Unlike a class, however, the workshop welcomes new writers at any time during a semester. Because participants may face a different audience every week, the sense of trust that typically develops in a creative writing class is less likely to occur naturally in the workshop. In an effort to foster a sense of community, our workshop facilitator records participants' names and project information, as we do for other kinds of conferences, and allows time at the beginning of every workshop for brief introductions of new participants. Our goal is to create a relaxed atmosphere that encourages thoughtful discussion of creative writing.

Time management also is crucial to the workshop's success. At the beginning of every workshop, our facilitator asks how many participants are planning to read and allots equal time for each writer's work. Some writers attend regularly whether or not they have material to share, and newcomers often prefer only to listen until they feel comfortable reading their writing to the group. Other newcomers might bring fifteen to twenty pages of material that they have been working on while in search of an audience. Limiting the reading and discussion of each writer's work enables the audience to maintain a clear focus and provide meaningful, detailed critiques.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of conducting this kind of workshop is moderating between the writer and the audience. Since workshop participants come voluntarily to discuss their writing, they usually respond readily to others' writing. Nevertheless, the facilitator should be prepared to begin or to temper the discussion if necessary. The same techniques used in other kinds of writing center conferences are appropriate. The facilitator may ask a writer for comments on her or his own writing, if the purpose has been fulfilled, what the strengths and weaknesses are, and what revisions, if any, might improve the piece. The writer's responses inevitably prompt a dialogue between the writer and the audience.

Like all of the writers with whom we conference, workshop participants may or may not revise. Some writers are more obliged to listen to and revise according to the comments of an instructor who eventually will evaluate and assign a grade to their writing. Since workshop facilitators will *not* evaluate participants' writing, their suggestions and those of the group may or may not be welcomed and considered. In fact, many writers attend the workshop because they have been told that their writing is "quite good." Open workshops also attract writers who migrate toward "creative" activities such as community theater, open poetry readings, and dungeons and dragons societies. These writers may view the workshop as little more than a captive audience. During one workshop, for instance, a writer answered a request for plot clarification by stating that the audience had failed to understand the story's "creative" structure. At this point, the mission of the Writing Center becomes an issue for workshop facilitators. They may be uneasy suggesting revisions as they would in a conference on academic writing which responds to assigned tasks and follows standard rules of purpose, thesis, paragraphing, and grammar. We must choose between being a passive audience or offering constructive criticism that could discourage writers from attending future workshops.

Although difficult at first, the latter strategy attempts to help a writer revise a specific text *and* think critically about future writing.

Some creative writers prefer the traditional one-to-one conference to the open workshop. They find reading to an audience of one less intimidating than reading to a group of several writers. Among those with whom I have worked are three writers whose weekly conferences guided them through extended creative writing projects. Each writer's conferences proceeded differently because of the varying nature of their writing, which included creative non-fiction, memoir, and poetry. These conferences helped us define the strategies we now use when working individually with creative writers in our Writing Center.

A senior environmental science major came timidly into our Writing Center looking for an audience for his creative non-fiction. While working as a forest service employee, he had kept a journal and was most interested in writing that questions human relationship with the environment. His first essay was a ten-page description of a stream in the Oregon wilderness that had caused the persona to question his insignificance within the natural world. Although this question was new to the writer, its overstatement enervated the essay's concrete images and language. During our first conference, I listened, took notes, and asked him to talk generally about his purpose, his past experiences as a writer, and what he enjoyed reading. He wasn't clear what his purpose was, had little experience as a writer, and had read Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Although we did not directly discuss his essay during that conference, he became familiar with the Writing Center and with some general issues that he would confront when revising the essay. Because self-motivated creative writers often are not pressured by deadlines, we have the luxury of offering this kind of introductory conference to define the Writing Center faculty member and client relationship.

During our second meeting, we discussed the essay in greater detail. I questioned the inconsistent point of view and the intrusive first person. I pointed to extended descriptions of the narrator's actions that upset the pace and confused the focus of the essay. At first, he questioned my suggestions; he believed every word was vital to communicate his feelings for the place and his political statement. If we'd been discussing a resume, I could have assured him that brevity was imperative. Since we had no guidelines or criteria to refer to, my suggestions seemed to originate from personal preference rather than from existing models of creative writing. We ended this conference with a discussion of Thoreau's voice and use of description in *Walden*, and I suggested he read Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* and Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge* to see how contemporary writers have combined environmental and political writing.

After several weeks, he returned with a new draft. He had deleted much of the narrator's actions and agreed that this revision clarified the focus. His goal was to publish the essay, so I approached the next level of editing by questioning repetition, clichéd metaphors, and confusing description. His standard response became, "I knew you were going to ask that." I could have questioned these aspects of his text much earlier, but that would not have encouraged him to develop his own critical reading skills. I would have been more of an editor than a tutor. Through our conferences, which continued for three semesters, this writer developed a critical voice for questioning and revising his own writing.

A political science professor from Poland originally came to the Writing Center to work on her English writing skills. She brought to her first conference a complex professional article that she was translating from Polish into English. The initial conference was frustrating for both of us. Although she was a strong, well-published writer in her own language, her translation suffered from imprecise technical diction. My lack of po-

litical science knowledge made it almost impossible for me to help her correct the language. The text became a hindrance to her original goal to improve her use of English. When our conference revealed that she was more interested in learning American idiomatic expressions than the terms in her field, she suggested that we meet again to discuss writing that she had composed in English.

She returned a week later with several pages of memoir writing. She read the piece aloud, and we discussed organization, sentence structure, and word choice. Although her images and language were outstanding, her complex sentences were more appropriate for academic writing than for memoir. She spent considerable time during each conference verbalizing her thoughts, rewriting, and making lists of recurring grammar errors. Creative writing has become the medium through which she studies American idioms and figurative language. Our conferences provide her with the guidance of a native English writer as she works her way through the writing process. As her English writing improves, she has produced over one hundred pages of a writing project to which she is now very committed.

The third model conferee was a freshman poet who had won writing prizes in high school but who lacked the confidence to take a college creative writing course. She read several poems during our first meeting. Her poetry showed a remarkably developed sense of images, metaphors, and structure, but her writing occasionally lapsed into cliché. We talked about the relationship between her purpose and the central images in each poem. She knew what she was trying to say and was aware of the lines in which her language and purpose were at odds. Like the other two creative writers, she used our conferences as a forum for confirming her doubts about a text and for brainstorming revisions.

After several conferences, I suggested some poets whom she might read as

models of confessional poetry, the genre with which she was struggling. We began subsequent conferences with discussions about what she had read and how that writing could be a model for her own writing. Conferences became a balance of listening to her poetry, discussing poetry as a genre, questioning specific parts of poems, and developing strategies for identifying and revising weaknesses. After a semester of one-to-one conferences, this poet joined the creative writing workshop as a means to broaden her audience. Self-motivated writers like this poet may use writing centers as resources for learning more about the kind of writing they are doing—just as students not enrolled in a technical writing course may come to learn more about the genre in which they are writing.

Writing centers which plan to develop an open workshop and one-to-one conferences for creative writers might consider also housing some basic creative writing resources. A creative writing resource library provides writers with sample journals and publication information. A modest library might include the current *Writer's Market*, *The International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*, *the Associated Writing Programs Chronicle*, the campus literary magazine, the state arts council publication, and sample literary journals. These publications will introduce creative writers to local and national writers, and will notify them of contests, submission deadlines, and publishers' guidelines. Writing centers often can obtain copies of these publications from creative writing instructors and their offices of student publications. In addition, posting contest and publication announcements on a bulletin board in the writing center encourages writers to revise and submit their writing for publication. Writing centers also can sponsor open readings on campus or in local bookstores and coffee shops as another incentive for creative writers not enrolled in a course to revise and share their writing.

As writing centers expand their resources to meet the changing needs of writers outside English departments, we face the challenge of working with self-motivated writers seeking an audience and a forum for discussing their writing. Although creative writing workshops and conferences require writing centers to work with highly personal and often non-traditional writing, we are not required to abandon our traditional conferencing strategies. Creative writers challenge us to examine how those strategies can be revised to meet the needs of yet another kind of writer within the university community.

Diane LeBlanc
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Writing centers online

The journal *Computers and Composition* announces a special issue for August, 1995: WRITING CENTERS ONLINE. In this issue, contributors discuss the ramifications of computers in the writing center, focusing on both the benefits and the challenges to traditional writing center work. Articles cover such issues as electronic mail and writing tutorials, tutoring in cyberspace, electronic bulletin boards, synchronous tutor conferences, information literacy and the writing center, and so on.

To order this special issue, volume 12.2, send a check for \$15 to: Customer Services, Ablex Publishing Corporation, 355 Chestnut Street, Norwood, NJ 07648. Those wishing volume 12.2 and 12.3 (December 1995) should send a check for \$35 to Ablex, noting that they wish a personal subscription. They will receive all three issues of volume 12.

A center sharing: "A tutor's dozen"

One of the most important activities of a writing/learning center is our constant self-assessment of the theory, pedagogy, and activities used in our center. An outgrowth of our on-going assessment (and an important part of our tutor training) is an examination of and possible modification of our beliefs about writing instruction and the role and responsibilities of a center tutor/coach. The "Tutor's Dozen" below is our current belief statement about our role and function as writing instructors and as writing tutors/coaches. The ideas will always be a "work in progress," and these beliefs are not carved in stone (or even in Silly Putty as we occasionally think). The ideas continue to produce many significant discussions among language arts faculty and writing center staff and tutors/coaches, and we hope sharing these will be of value to others involved in one-to-one writing assistance.

A Tutor's Dozen

Beliefs about the function of writing instructors and writing tutors/coaches:

- I. We are tutors/coaches of writers, not writing.
- II. We teach/tutor/coach writers to help them become good thinkers, not to help them become great writers.
- III. We must believe and practice that a writer's work in progress is neither good nor bad; it is merely finished or unfinished.
- IV. Empathy is crucial. We must write ourselves, and we must seek response from others. As tutors/coaches, we must empathize with writers who have sought our assistance, and we must help writers empathize with the instructor who assigned the writing. Writers must clearly understand the intention, the audience, and the evaluation criteria for the assignment.
- V. Possession is 90% of the law, and 100% of a writing process. Our reactions to and suggestions for changes in a piece of reading are merely "possibilities" for the writer's consideration. We must help each writer understand that s/he is ultimately responsible for her/his own writing process and her/his final product.
- VI. We can respond and offer "possibilities" to the writing, the written, and/or the writer, and we must be certain that the writer clearly understands the focus of our responses and "possibilities."
- VII. Concise is nice in writing and in response and "possibilities." We must limit our "possibilities" to those we believe offer the writer the most meaningful options for improving her/his work. We must not overwhelm the writer with "possibilities."
- VIII. One of our responsibilities is to help each writer develop *competence* in his/her writing and thinking processes. An equally important responsibility is to help each writer develop *confidence* in her/his own competence.
- IX. It is vital that we be honest in our responses to each writer's work; it is even more vital that we are supportive of and encouraging about each writer's efforts.
- X. We need to constantly evaluate our own methods of instruction/tutoring/coaching others. In order to become more competent and confident as tutors/coaches, we must learn from each writer we attempt to aid so that we are more valuable to each succeeding writer with whom we work.
- XI. Attention to and work on correctness are the final act in a writing process; however, we must make each writer understand that correctness is often the first element a reader notices. Each writer must conscientiously work to make sure that surface errors do not detract from the readability or authority of the reading.
- XII. We must understand and practice that we are successful as tutors/coaches when writers no longer need our assistance.

*Jim Upton
Burlington High School
Burlington, Iowa*

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

Sept. 28-30: National Writing Centers Association Conference, in St. Louis, MO
Contact: Eric Hobson, St. Louis College of Pharmacy, 4588 Parkview Pl., St. Louis, MO 63110 (314-367-8700, ext. 244).

October 21: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in Seattle, WA
Contact: Larry Nichols, Seattle University Writing Center, English Department, Seattle University, Broadway and Madison, Seattle, WA 98122-4460 (206-296-5309)

Feb. 1-3: Southeastern Writing Center Association and South Carolina Writing Center Association, in Myrtle Beach, SC
Contact: Phillip Gardner, Writing Center, Francis Marion University, Florence, SC 29501

Book Review: Seeing the forest in the trees

When Tutor Meets Student (2nd ed.). Edited by Martha Maxwell. Ann Arbor, MI: U. of Michigan Press, 1994. cloth: \$32.50; paperbound: \$16.95 Order from: U. of Michigan Press, P.O. Box 1104, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

Reviewed by Stuart Blythe
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Although my opinion has changed, I must admit it: In first encountering *When Tutor Meets Student*, I was inclined to ask, "Why read an entire collection of essays by peer tutors?" It's not that such essays lack merit. I enjoy and benefit from the "Tutor's Column" in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*. (Some of the selections in *When Tutor Meets Student* first appeared in the *Newsletter*.) I also continue to include some of them in the readings I assign for a peer tutor training course.

But an entire book of such essays? I feared, before reading the collection, that I would end up feeling just like George Durgerian, a peer tutor whose work appears there. "When I read all the case studies that they fed me in the first weeks of my how-to-be-a-tutor class," Durgerian writes:

I realized they all said the same thing: "Teach the student to solve problems by himself or herself," which translates to "Shut your mouth, and instead of dominating the session, listen to what the student has to say." (102-103)

Reading through the book, one might be inclined to share Durgerian's conclusion because many of the essays do indeed show how tutors learned to shut their mouths and listen. I think, though, that the collection tells (and offers) us more than we may realize at first.

What the Book Contains and Why It's Useful

When Tutor Meets Student performs a valuable service by collecting and grouping the essays of tutors in the U.C. Ber-

keley Student Learning Center (SLC). The book is filled with accounts of tutors' responses to particular instances and to extended tutor-student relationships. Some essays examine successful practices, some failed encounters; others speculate, sometimes without a firm conclusion, about alternative practices and student motivations.

The collection groups related essays into six chapters—such as "The Tutor's Role," "Increasing Confidence," and "Cultural Diversity"—and readers are encouraged to see how all selections relate and overlap regardless of the editor's groupings. The book also includes a variety of materials from the SLC—materials such as brochures, evaluation forms, and syllabi. And, though no one will find them all useful, questions for discussion appear after many essays. Therefore, this book might have uses both for tutor training and writing center administration.

How the Book Helps Patterns to Emerge

With so many essays gathered in one place, readers have an opportunity to look for patterns that can only emerge when various strands of experience come together. In other words, *When Tutor Meets Student* offers us a rather unique way to reflect on what happens in writing centers because the book allows a perspective that, I suspect, individual tutors (or even small groups) cannot easily attain by themselves.

In spite of repeated rejections of the notion of writing as a solitary enterprise, the primary end of most writing centers is individualized instruction. This makes

the individual the primary unit of emphasis, even when many of us justify writing centers as crucial places of social exchange. In many cases, then, it's easy to look at tutorials as the interaction between two individuals and to miss the larger social forces that may come to bear on that occasion.

When Tutor Meets Student can offer an antidote by allowing tutors to examine multiple accounts of tutor/student interaction collected from a particular site. Given this opportunity, tutors might be more likely to see trends that they would miss in their own efforts to help each individual writer who comes to them; tutors might, in other words, see larger patterns emerge; they might begin to see a "forest" rather than just individual trees.

Tutors can see in *When Tutor Meets Student*, for instance, an illustration of Eric Hobson's assertion that positivist, expressive, and social constructionist philosophies compete in writing centers. Some essays, such as the one by Susan Enfield, envision a supportive role for tutors as they help each student "find her own voice" in the face of restrictive institutional constraints. Others, such as the piece by Jennifer Dike, recount efforts to help students comprehend and master the vocabulary of teachers and the institutions they represent.

Tutors also have the chance to question why only one of the essays in the chapter on increasing tutor confidence was written by a male. Certainly we must account for editorial selection, but does the book inadvertently suggest that building confidence in one's skills is a greater concern for women than men?

That seems to be a point worth discussing in a tutor training session.

How the Book Prompts Tutors to Investigate Otherness

Because the book may prompt readers to see patterns that usually remain obscure for an individual tutor, *When Tutor Meets Student* also illustrates the difficulty of adequately comprehending a student's motivations in a tutorial—a dilemma mentioned repeatedly in *Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center*. (See, for example, essays in that collection by MacLennan, Lassner, and Abascal-Hildebrand.) *When Tutor Meets Student* often helps readers see this by providing questions that ask for other explanations of a tutor's comments or a student's actions. (See, for example, the questions following "Monocultural Blindness.")

Tutors could be prompted to question a writer's interpretation in any number of these essays. In "My Attempt to Teach Intuitive Writing," for instance, Nicole Reader claims to rely on an "intuitive" sense of good writing because she doesn't feel she knows as much about "the official rules of writing" and other "technicalities" (80). She claims simply to know what "sounds right," and she believes that she can help others recognize and develop that sense. Reader admits, however, that such attempts "did not always go smoothly."

What Reader apparently fails to consider is the possibility that her "intuitive sense" is not intuitive at all. What seems absent in the essay is any inquiry into what gives one person "intuition" but not another. I would like to know, for example, what kinds of language Reader grew up hearing and speaking. Perhaps she knows "good English" because she grew up speaking it, and perhaps the student who grew so irritated with Reader's emphasis on style didn't have that privilege. Perhaps Reader simply couldn't see the possible role (perhaps not deterministic, but surely influential) that social class and ethnicity might play on an "intuition" for good writing because her

conscientious emphasis on each individual case kept her from seeing how one experience might relate to another.

How the Book Can Aid Inquiry and Enrich Practice

Because the book allows patterns to emerge more easily than in one-on-one cases, and because it helps tutors to question how they perceive each student, *When Tutor Meets Student* can help centers build a more rigorous practice that accounts for more than individual difference—an impulse shared by many in composition.

For instance, Louise Phelps argues in "Practical Wisdom and the Geography of Knowledge in Composition" for a move from local knowledge to a more detached form of inquiry. Taken individually, each essay in *When Tutor Meets Student* illustrates an element in *reflective practice* as defined by Phelps. Reflective practice is, according to Phelps, the work instructors do in classrooms (and, I would add, in writing centers)—work influenced by reflection on past experience and interaction with colleagues (e.g. shared stories, *lore*).

However, as Phelps suggests, we also need to take a broader, more detached, view. Phelps calls such a strategy *practical inquiry*, which involves "sustained work to understand something through a systematic, self-critical process of discovery" (877). It studies local practice by "temporarily detach[ing] inquiry from action in order to feed back understanding to practice at the level of curriculum" (877).

Patricia Harkin makes a similar kind of argument in "Bringing Lore to Light" when she suggests that educators from a variety of perspectives come together in conferences "that ask us to work up from the practice of lore, not down from a theory of writing" (64). Such work is desirable, Harkin suggests, because composition and teaching are "post-modern" forms of inquiry that rely on *narrative knowledge*—"the kinds of tacit awareness that comes to teachers (among other

postmodern subjects) as a consequence of the work that they do" (57).

All these factors make *When Tutor Meets Student* more than a collection of stories about how tutors learned to shut their mouths and listen. The book gives readers an opportunity to take a broader view of writing center practice at Berkeley and, by analogy, to take such a view in their own centers. In this way, *When Tutor Meets Student* provides a body of lore on which tutors can speculate, with a certain degree of detachment, in order to help conduct practical inquiries into effective tutorial practice. The book can help each of us in our own centers "extend," as Louise Phelps suggests, "a personal repertoire with exemplary themes from other practitioners' experiences" (870).

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Writing lab consultants talk about helping students writing across the disciplines

According to a 1985 Modern Language Association survey of four-year colleges and universities in America, 47% of these schools had a Writing Across the Curriculum program (Kinneavy 353). In a more recent survey published in 1989, a survey of all post secondary institutions in both the United States and Canada, Susan McLeod reports that "WAC seems to be seen as a more or less permanent fixture of institutions that have programs" (339).

One of the most widely practiced features of WAC is to encourage its students to use the services of writing labs. No doubt, supporting WAC is to encourage its students to use the services of writing labs. No doubt, supporting WAC is a Herculean task for labs. Of course, as a first step towards providing this support, lab directors can make their labs into resource centers where professors may find sample handouts for writing different assignments in various fields (from lab reports in biology to term papers in history). And directors can also secure from publishers textbooks¹ on writing in different disciplines, ranging from art to sociology. Gathering such materials will, initially, demonstrate the lab's desire to assist WAC professors and their students.

However, directors must do more than mechanically gathering handouts and textbooks. They need to examine the effect of WAC on the consultants themselves. In other words, lab directors should also attempt to understand how consultants adjust to students writing in non-English courses and how consultants themselves are affected by their experience. Wondering how our lab would handle these issues, I asked six peer consultants, with a total of at least ten years experience helping students, to meet and discuss among themselves four questions facing tutors who assist students writing across the disciplines. What follows are the consultants' responses, voices which

have an unimpeachable *ethos* since they have been in the trenches each day, helping clients in many fields.

Question 1: What do we do differently for clients who are writing papers in non-English classes?

Peter: Although the students are not in an English class, I don't feel an added burden to decipher the assignment. The responsibility is off of me because I'm helping with the writing, not the topic.

Forest: In fact, I tell clients right up front I am not an expert.

Brandon: The responsibility of what is needed truly belongs to the client.

Peter: Right. I usually back off and let clients direct the session, even more than I usually do, especially since I have no choice.

Mary-Jane: As an additional survival technique, I ask clients if the professor wants any of the classnotes included in the paper, especially if the paper seems to lack depth.

Peter: We also look at the sample papers from various disciplines, papers kept on file in the Writing Lab; those are like "little bibles" right there in the lab.

Tammy: I do that, too. And, after working with clients writing in a non-English class, I also ask, "Have you proven your thesis?"

Peter: Another good technique is using "Rogerian reflection," telling clients, "This is what I think you are saying. . ." and then asking if that is right.

Alice: Being "out of the clients' discipline" does not, however, make me feel inferior or even helpless. I realize that every discipline has its own expectations, and I probably know something about *Oedipus Rex* that clients don't know.

Mary-Jane: Besides, our being uninformed about a topic makes clients feel better about coming to the Writing Lab; they're teaching us something.

Peter: That's true. It's a horizontal, not vertical relationship, and this helps students feel better about writing in general.

Question 2: What have we found to be similar rhetorical features for the various writings students do, no matter the discipline?

Forest: I've found that all papers need to have unity and flow and organization. And it goes without saying, that mechanics, punctuation, and grammar also play vital roles in all writings, as does documentation.

Brandon: The papers have to have a thesis and support, with the support coming from the clients' own thoughts or from secondary sources.

Peter: I try to emphasize that although the evidence might be different, all arguments must be logical.

Mary-Jane: I think we also encourage the "interest factor"; that is, a paper has to be compelling and the idea persuasive so the essay will be welcomed by the reader.

Tammy: And what clients think is “right” for an English paper is often how they see writing for their other classes. So, we have to help them understand that *most* of those features will, indeed, be the same.

Question 3: What have we found to be different rhetorical features in various writings across the disciplines?

Peter: Students sometimes can’t readily shift from the voice of an English essay to the voice of a scientific paper. To get clients to see the difference, I’ve asked them to read several papers and journal articles written in psychology, for example, to see how sentence structure (active versus passive), pronouns, and emphasis can vary.

Alice: The timeliness of the evidence varies from one discipline to another. In a Shakespeare course, a student can use sources from both the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth. However, in the sciences, the more current, the better.

Tammy: I’ve also found some disciplines may differ at the freshman level but be more similar at the advanced levels. When students first begin writing in English and history courses, I try to show them that freshman-level English courses usually focus on the students’ original readings of a text, that is, ideas about a character in a story or play. Although some research is required, the course emphasizes original readings of a document. History, at the introductory level, works less with an original text than with secondary sources. So, students learn to back up facts with research. The two disciplines, at the introductory level, also differ in their attitudes towards writing; freshman English is a

cumulative way to write, with each course building on the other; in history, students are usually told to write an essay but are not necessarily taught how.

Forest: That’s true, but as students take advanced English or history courses, I think the differences between the two majors seem to lessen. Both disciplines stress interpretation. Even though sources are vital to a history paper, writing in history is like that in advanced English courses; both use interpretation and both explore how interpretations can vary from one critic/historian to another. How one historian views a quotation from a famous person could be different from how another historian interprets it, just as two English critics can vary in their readings of *Hamlet*.

Question 4: How has our perception of education and knowledge been affected by helping students in different disciplines?

Brandon: Students should start writing at as early an age as possible, like doing letters or journals so they can become accustomed to all kinds of writing. Students also need to write in every course; high school students write only in English courses, so they’re not able to write in a college history class.

Tammy: Unfortunately, writing is used as punishment, so that negative view of writing needs to be changed as well.

Forest: Students should also know the difference between primary and secondary sources; sometimes our clients don’t know this before coming to college.

Peter: At the college level, professors could give out

concrete writing guidelines in all disciplines, although this seems to be done only in English.

Tammy: Along those lines, professors could also hand out model papers showing different grades, especially a sample “A” paper.

Mary-Jane: I’ve seen some changes already. Some professors are getting better about wording their assignment sheets; instead of vague references to “critiquing a play,” one professor now provides more specific, less skimpy directions.

Peter: Also, at the college level, professors could show students that each discipline has different goals; there are different ways to come at a question.

Alice: That’s true; English might examine a suicide in a poem like “Richard Cory”; social scientists examine it through statistics, while biologists use anatomy and experiments.

Peter: In addition to reforming education, I’ve learned something about how writers think or how knowledge is created. There is a relationship between writing and thinking. Cognitive development and revising and rethinking are all part of writing; being forced to put it down on paper is much different from working it out in the head.

Mary-Jane: I’ve also learned about students’ emotions and reactions to writing. My tutoring experiences have taught me to encourage student writers and to have patience when dealing with them and with all writing in general. If we can get students past barriers of anxiety and past the idea that writing is just something to do for now, to fulfill a course requirement, they may

come to realize that writing will always be a part of their lives and that it is a useful tool.

Forest: And I think we've learned something else about knowledge itself. I think we've acquired "a holistic view of education" (Impson 8); by working with different people we've picked up different content, in other words, a few new facts along the way.

Of course, the comments of the six consultants reported here are only a start in exploring how consultants adjust and adapt to WAC. These responses, however, do obviously demonstrate that consultants who work with students in different fields have learned a great deal about the teaching of writing as well as about the basis of knowledge in different fields. More important, the responses also indicate that the basic training of consultants makes them readily adaptable and especially suited to assisting students in all disciplines. Because they know how to ask questions and how to be the good "readers," "coaches," or "the uninformed tutors," they possess the basic qualities needed to help clients in all fields, from art to zoology. Indeed, consultants may do their best work when they are not well-versed in the students' discipline because consultants make clients adjust to them as non-experts, thus, leading clients to learn about writing in that particular rhetorical community.

The comments also indicate that WAC can learn a great deal from writing lab consultants. At this point in the development of WAC, the field is beginning to explore the rhetoric of various fields; in other words, WAC is moving beyond just journal writing and write-to-learn concepts to sophisticated examinations of the rhetorical features unique to each discipline (Jones and Comprone). As it does so, WAC can turn to writing lab consultants for help in learning the right questions to ask in different disciplines. Perhaps WAC professors could even sit in on consultations in order to hear the types of questions consultants ask about

writings in various disciplines. As a result, WAC professors could gain insight into their students' minds as the students learn the rhetorical nature of a discipline, all because consultants are there to talk to clients about the writings.

I would encourage other labs which assist a WAC program to have their own consultants sit down and answer the same four questions in order to compare their reactions to those of the six tutors cited. And they will probably discover that writing lab consultants, in their own special, personal, one-to-one way, not only provide invaluable support to Writing Across the Curriculum but also learn about themselves in the process.

*Bonnie Devet and peer tutors: Peter Cramer, Alice France, Forest Mahan, Mary-Jane Ogawa, Tammy Raabe, and Brandon Rogers
College of Charleston
Charleston, SC*

Endnote

¹D. C. Heath, Scott-Foresman, and Little, Brown are just a few of the publishers who offer books for specific disciplines, textbooks such as Arthur W. Biddle and Daniel J. Bean's *Writer's Guide: Life Sciences* (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1987), Richard Marious' *A Short Guide to Writing About History* (Glenview, IL: Scott-Foresman, 1989), and Sylvan Barnet's *A Short Guide to Writing about Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985).

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Question Exchange

In response to the invitation to join the Question Exchange (February, 1995 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*), our Writing Center decided to come up with questions we've asked, or might ask, during a tutoring session. These are a few questions our tutors came up with.

Useful questions:

1. What is the assignment and/or do you have any written instructions from the instructor?
2. Have you heard of BOYS FAN? An acronym on our campus for comma rules.
3. What would you like to focus on in this session?
4. Why did you use this punctuation mark in this spot?
5. Can you point out your thesis statement?
6. Can you tell me in your own words what you are saying here? (Then instruct writers to write what they just said.)
7. Did we cover everything you wanted?

Not very valuable questions:

(Be careful of embarrassing questions.)

1. What is your first language?
2. Do you understand?
3. Is that clear?

*Barbara Hudson and tutors
Whatcom Community College
Bellingham, WA*

TUTORS' COLUMN

Helping students know what their professors want

The room is large and light, with a row of windows on one wall and several formica-covered tables and plastic chairs at which to work. It is silent except for the low hum of the whispers of other tutors and tutees. Sara sits next to me but faces the window away from me, squinting her eyes and nervously rolling her pencil in her hands. I have just asked her what she intends to accomplish with the paper she is currently working on. She can not answer. She has been sent to the writing center by Professor Jones, her literature instructor, who felt she could benefit from some individual instruction. After some careful probing, I find the problem is twofold: she does not clearly understand the assignment, and she fears that the professor has a hidden agenda of arbitrary rules and that she must guess what these rules are.

The problem Sara is facing is common to students coming to the writing center for the first time. The problem amounts to a lack of communication between the student and the professor, but is easier to diagnose than to correct. As tutors, we need to find out specifically what the communication problem is before we can help students overcome it.

So Sara and I address the hidden agenda misconception first. I ask "Why do you think Professor Jones has rules that you aren't aware of?"

"They all do" is her reply. "It started in high school. One teacher would say that you can't use the word 'nice,' and the next would say not to use the word 'I.' Then another would say that 'nice' is all right, but not to start a sentence with 'and' or 'because.'"

Now I know where this fear comes from. Over a period of time, she has been given rules without adequate explanation of why they are being implemented, and so it seems to her that these rules are arbitrary, and that every instructor must have his/her own set. Every student has a different writing history, and each person's experience determines in part how s/he approaches a writing assignment. I know that since she is afraid of using the personal pronoun "I" in her writing, she will have a difficult time asserting her opinion in this paper. I also know that a fear of using words such as "and" or "because" will impede her from using sophisticated sentence patterns and embedded clauses. Further, this apprehension that the instructor has rules that she is not aware of is inhibiting her ability to get her ideas onto paper.

I tell Sara that although writing expectations can vary from one professor to another, the rules instructors implement are not arbitrary, but perhaps were just never explained to her. I attempt to clarify this by explaining that some teachers who want their students to use facts rather than opinions will ask them to avoid using "I," thus preventing "I believe . . ." or "I think . . ." statements; that the teacher who wanted her to avoid using "nice" was probably hoping to get more specific adjectives like "kind," "loving," or "nurturing"; and that avoiding opening sentences with words like "and" or "because" is one way of avoiding some sentence fragments like "Because I like ice cream." More important, I explain, is that the logic behind any rule can usually be discovered by simply asking the teacher.

Talking to professors is often the best way to find out what they expect. Most do not mind answering questions about writing assignments, and some even keep copies of papers they have received in the past to use as models. However, students will need to know what questions to ask. If the concern is that the professor may have rules or pet peeves which haven't been stated or clarified, have the student ask specific questions such as "Are there any words you would like your students to avoid using?" or "What is more important to you: correct grammar usage or originality of ideas?" If the concern is with something as specific as how to approach a critical essay, have the student explain to the professor that s/he is not understanding the assignment, and ask for specific directions.

But often the student's inexperience becomes a barrier for communication. In these cases, it may be a better idea for the tutor to visit the professor since the tutor's experience with writing processes and problems and his/her vocabulary for dealing with writing may allow a more fruitful conversation. This information can then be scaled down and carefully taught to the student. This way, both the tutor and tutee can be working toward a well defined goal.

If both of these strategies prove futile because of time constraints or inability to meet with the professor, there is still another means of finding out what professors want. Often either you or someone else the student knows will have taken a course from him/her. Have the student ask friends and classmates for information concerning writing expectations, or

ask to look at papers they have written for his/her classes. Then go through the papers carefully, looking at comments, writing style, attention paid to mechanical errors, and anything indicated by the instructor as being good or bad. Use these as guidelines for forming goals for writing.

But sometimes the problem turns out to be so complex that knowing about or talking to the professor will not help the student understand the assignment. For example, Sara is writing a critical literature paper and is uneasy with terms such as "style" and "tone" that she needs to incorporate into her writing. Further-

more, because of her general inexperience with writing, she does not understand the writing prompt that she has been assigned. She needs more than a brief chat with the professor. In this case, she needs someone to walk her through the work of literature and point out specific conventions, or work through a sample paper and show her how it is written and what processes may have been involved in approaching and writing the paper. Although a writing center tutor is not always able to do this, it is an important problem to recognize because the student's writing will suffer unless the content is clearly understood. Students may need to seek some addi-

tional help, such as from a content area tutor.

Helping students get a clear idea of what their goals are is a necessary part of tutoring. Just overcoming the sense that rules are arbitrary or esoteric is a giant step towards fluency. Apprehension caused by lack of professor-student communication can inhibit students' ability to get their ideas onto paper, and when this is overcome, students have a much better chance at becoming better writers.

*Jeannie Griffith
Peer Tutor*

*California State University, Stanislaus
Turlock, CA*

1996 CCCC Research Network Forum Announcement

The Research Network Forum, to be held at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (March 27-30, 1996, in Milwaukee) is an opportunity for published researchers, new researchers, and graduate students to discuss their current

research projects and to receive response. If you would like to be considered for work-in-progress presentation, send a title and a brief description of your project to Kim Brian Lovejoy, Dept. of English, Indiana University-Purdue University

at Indianapolis, 425 University Blvd., Indianapolis, IN 46202. FAX: 317-274-2347; IDRI100@Indycms.bitnet
Deadline: May 30, 1995. Please note: a proposal to present at the Forum does NOT count as a proposal for the main program.

Learning Association of New England

Call for Proposals
October 27, 1995
Burlington, MA

Call for proposals due June 9. To receive an official form, contact Margaret Pobywajlo, University of New Hampshire at Manchester, 220 Hackett Hill Road, Manchester, NY 03102. Tel: 603-668-0700 (x255); fax: 603-623-2745.

Southeastern Writing Center Association and South Carolina Writing Center Association

Call for Proposals
February 1-3, 1996
Myrtle Beach, SC
"Convergence"
Keynote speaker: Wendy Bishop

The conference planners are soliciting ideas so that the program menu will accommodate the diversity of writing centers. Deadline for proposals: Oct. 31. For information, contact Phillip Gardner, Writing Center, Francis Marion University, Florence, SC 29501 (pgardner@fmarion.edu).

THE WRITING LAB

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WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER INDEX

Annotated Categories

(Compiled by R.J. Lee and Mary Jo Turley)

ADMINISTRATION

Purpose, Objective, Goal—Discussions of what a lab is or should be and outlooks for the future.

Setting Up—How to start a writing lab, including space, funding, tutors, and promotion.

Daily Operations—Methods of keeping the lab running smoothly day to day. Discussions on record keeping and tutor info exchanging.

Promotion—Techniques in public relations within the university and community as well as promoting the lab to students.

Evaluation—Methods of evaluating the lab—by numbers or effectiveness—including tutors, students, and administration. Reasons to evaluate, etc.

Funding—Discussions of lack of funding, funding sources, and considerations when asking for funding.

Questionnaires—Surveys and answers sent out by WLN readers on topics such as who uses the lab, what services are needed, and peer training methods.

Atmosphere—Physical surroundings of labs and how to create the right space and mood for tutoring.

Problems and Solutions—Discussions of problems and offered solutions to subjects other than the above categories. Includes topics such as what to do when faced with closing because of budget cuts, and justifying the lab to faculty and administration.

Expansion—Discussions on physical expansion to larger facilities as well as offering more programs in the classroom and community and uniting with another office such as computing services to share expenses and funding.

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Tutoring Experiences, Stories—Incidents and experiences when tutoring and satire on experiences and themes.

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Learner Personalities—Discusses tutorial methods based on personality tests as well as tutor observation such as quiet, aggressive, or afraid.

ESL—Discusses tutorial methods when tutoring ESL students.

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Software Reviews—Review of writing lab-related software by WLN readers.

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Ask Carl—Irregular thoughts from Carl Glover.

(*Tutors’ Column* essays are not included here and are indexed by topic.)

Voices from the Net—WCenter discussions compiled by Eric Crump.

Writing Center Ethics—Discussions of ethical considerations by Michael Pemberton.

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Equity, Opportunity, and Access

Reason number five in my countdown of "The Top Ten Reasons Why Writing Centers are Unethical" at first seemed a rather simple one to confront, and I had some brief moments of anxiety about whether I would be able to fill an entire column with the relatively small amount of substance required for an adequate rebuttal. The "reason" consisted of only two short sentences, and it seemed to me that an appropriate response would require no more than the same number of sentences to do it justice.

Reason #5: *Writing centers are unethical because they provide help to some students and not to others. This gives an unfair advantage to the students who use the center.*

Response #5: *Life isn't always fair. So what else is new?*

Though this answer satisfies the little demon in me that loves quick, from-the-gut and off-the-cuff responses (and what a grisly image *those* figures of speech invoke in tandem), it has the potential of leading to a great deal of misunderstanding about what, exactly, I mean by "fairness" and the kind of institutional and pedagogical equity that all of us believe in to one degree or another. In short, what I mean is probably not what you think I mean.

Let me explain. The simple truth of the time-worn platitude "life isn't always fair" is obscured both by its simplicity and the fact that it has, indeed, become a platitude and is therefore rarely reflected upon in anything other than a superficial way. That life isn't "fair" to everyone—in the sense that some people are born into wealthy families while some are born into poor ones; that some people are born healthy and normal while others suffer from severe deformities or diseases; that some people lead rich, full

lives while others have theirs cut tragically short by random acts of violence—is so obvious that it hardly needs stating. Life does *not* guarantee that we will be born with the same abilities, strengths, or good fortune as our neighbors, and in this sense, life truly is unfair. We will never obtain complete homogeneity as a society or as a culture, and for that, I suppose, we can find some good reasons to be grateful. (For those who wish to read a rather chilling, yet amusing, story of a society in which efforts are made to embrace this kind of social uniformity, I recommend Harlan Ellison's "'Repent Harlequin,' said the Ticktock Man.") However, the inevitable vagaries of individual and social diversity are not generally what people refer to when they use this aphorism to rationalize away some of life's little inequities. They do not refer to the unfairness of *circumstance*—nature's way of reminding us that there are some aspects of life over which we have no control—as much as they do the unfairness of *opportunity*—that some people naturally have better access to information, to services, and to support than do others.

And it is this latter meaning that critics are referring to when they say that the students who use writing centers have an unfair advantage over those who don't. The students who use writing centers get assistance with their written texts, while other students in the same classes are forced to struggle along by themselves and be evaluated "on their own merits." On the surface, at least, there is a veneer of inequity here, a sense that some students are getting help that others are not and that we are therefore privileging the students who get assistance and marginalizing the rest.

Several of my previous columns have highlighted the rather narrow and inaccurate current-traditional epistemology

which underlies the belief that academic writing should take place in a kind of self-imposed solitary confinement, so it is probably not necessary for me to make the case once again. Suffice it to say that virtually no writer ever writes in complete isolation from readers or contexts, and there seems to be little significant difference in ethical terms between students who go to the writing center for help with their papers and students who seek help from their professors during office hours. Some people make an effort to learn as much as they can whenever they can from whomever they can and however they can. Some people don't. That's not unfair; that's the norm.

But questions of access and opportunity to use the writing center are still important to consider, I think. No matter how big the writing center or how small the student body, there are only a limited number of tutor-hours available each week and they will never be sufficient to ensure that each and every student who wants assistance will be able to get it when they want it or need it, especially if it turns out that *every* student wants it and needs it. As much time as writing center directors and their staffs spend promoting the center and trying to drum up business, we secretly dread the thought that every student on our campus will want to visit our center. We want to do our jobs, but we don't want to do them too well. I actively discourage individual instructors in individual classes from requiring their students to visit the writing center. Beyond the problem of coping with people who really don't want to be there in the first place, writing center personnel just don't have the time, space, money, or facilities available to handle everyone.

So we play a delicate balancing act. We work with a select group of students. Sometimes the students are self-selected

(as when nearly all appointments are made on a voluntary, drop-in basis), sometimes the students are institutionally selected (as when the writing center is linked closely to WAC courses with a clear tutorial component), and sometimes the students are selected by a combination of the two (as when the writing center is clearly marked as a remedial center for “underprepared” students whose writing abilities are considered to be below par). In none of these contexts do we—or can we—provide the same assistance to every student across campus in equal measure. Still, in each context, I think it is possible to refute the allegation that by providing help to some students, we are being unfair to all.

In the case of self-selected students, we can make a convincing and honest case that everyone has equal opportunity and equal access to the writing center. The students themselves decide whether or not they want to take advantage of writing center services, and they have no

right to complain, therefore, if they deny themselves the opportunity.

In the case of institutionally selected students (within WAC programs, for example), we can maintain all students within the particular program have equal access to tutorial assistance and are “competing” only with students who have similar opportunities and benefits. The means and circumstances by which these programs are established or by which the students are chosen to participate are generally not matters under our purview, but since we are not being asked to assist one group of students to the specific detriment of another, the ethical problems appear relatively few and of minimal concern.

Lastly, in the case of remedial students, I think we can take the hardest line of all. These are students who have been admitted by our institutions and expressly targeted as being in need of additional individual help. They are not

competing with other students; they are struggling to show up at the starting line. If we really have an interest in seeing these students succeed—or at least compete with some sort of educational parity—then the kind of tutorial help provided by a writing center seems to be the purest expression of a “Fairness Doctrine” we might imagine. To deny these students the help they need with their writing skills appears, ironically, to be the height of *unfairness*, and that, it seems to me, is a situation we should try to overcome.

In retrospect and in closing, then, perhaps I should modify my initial gut-level response. Instead of saying, “Life isn’t always fair. So what else is new?” a more appropriate reply might be: “Life isn’t always fair. But sometimes we can help make it that way.”

Michael A. Pemberton
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THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

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