

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 20, Number 1

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

September, 1995

...FROM THE EDITOR...

Hello again, and welcome back!

While preparing this first issue of the newsletter for the new academic year, I pictured you too "revving up" to launch in again. It's an odd time, a mixture of anticipation and eagerness to see how our new plans for the year will work out and an anxious race against the clock to set everything in motion again. Tutoring schedules have to be worked out, budgets figured, new staff trained, publicity printed and distributed, coffee pots cleaned out and started, and so on (and so on). Then, in the midst of it all, a student wanders in. "Uh . . . ah, could someone help me with this paper?" And we're off again. . . .

But even with all this local action, there are also colleagues to talk with at conferences this fall. Don't forget the National Writing Centers Association, in St. Louis; the National Peer Tutoring in Writing Conference, in October; and the regional writing center association conferences listed on page 6. And do save some time to fill your coffee cup, sit back, and enjoy this issue of the newsletter with articles about community colleges, that sticky grammar question, tutor training activities, computers, and so on. And the conversation continues. . . .

• Muriel Harris, editor

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A snapshot: Community college writing centers in an age of transition

Our writing center staff read Sharon Wright's *Mapping Diversity: Writing Center Survey Results* in the June 1994 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* but found that while some of her findings applied to us and were helpful in strategic planning, most of her respondents were from universities—and one of our most pressing problems was one universities rarely face: the absence of upper-division English students and graduate students to act as peer tutors.

We therefore decided to survey other community colleges around the country to see how they solved this problem. We also hoped to create a snapshot of a typical community college writing center. We wanted to know what the centers looked like, what other activities they were involved in, and how they evaluated their effectiveness, in addition to the standard questions regarding budgets, salaries, and funding sources. We hoped that this information would enable us to spot trends as well. As writing centers become aligned with learning centers, for instance, do they gain or lose in the process? And are writing centers prepar-

ing themselves to support emerging technologies? The survey was sent to all members of WCenter, an electronic discussion group, in the spring of 1995. *WLN* also announced the survey so that off-line centers could participate. The thirteen community colleges who responded represent a cross section from every region of the country.

General Background of the Participating Centers

The survey was composed of 20 open-ended questions. Respondents

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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.

did not always give full information or chose not to answer some questions. The percentages reported, therefore, do not always total 100% and are not always based on the total number of respondents. Of the centers that responded, 46% fall under the jurisdiction of an English department, 15% are under developmental studies, another 15% are under a larger learning center, 15% are separate entities, and 8% fall under continuing education. The centers are open an average of 42.8 hours a week, with 54% open more than 40 hours. Of the 46% who are open under 40 hours a week, half of them are open at least 36 hours a week. The number of centers with evening hours is 69%, and 23% have Saturday hours.

The centers serve from 9,000 students a semester (with a total enrollment of 13,000) to 240 students a semester (with 1,350 total enrollment). The average number of users is 2,424 with an average enrollment of 6,490. However, at least one center is on a quarter system, and some centers do not count computer users, so the actual number of users may differ. The centers are rarely engaged in profit-making activities. One center offers one-credit hour refresher courses in spelling, grammar, and paragraph writing, and another charges for their résumé service. Only 15% of the centers report developmental students as their primary clientele. Composition students are the heaviest users (54%) while a combination (liberal arts and applied sciences) of student writers comprise 31%.

A total of 85% of the centers serve multiple disciplines. Directors' salaries range from \$24,120 for a ten-month position to \$46,700 for a full professor whose salary is determined by academic rank. The average salary reported was \$29,782. Academic rank and tenure, when applicable, are reported to be independent of the director's position, originating from the English department.

The majority of the directors' job descriptions require an M.A. degree (62%), previous writing center experience

(46%), and teaching experience (54%). Three center directors have B.A. degrees, but two of those directors are currently working on their M.A. One center requires an Associate degree with a major in English, speech, and psychology (and an emphasis in reading and study skill improvement). Two centers require computer knowledge, and a third director was hired because her predecessor "did not want to learn anything about computers," while she was willing to learn all she could. As Wright discovered in her surveys, administrative experience did not appear to be a criterion for employment (3).

One director reports that in addition to writing center duties, she also teaches full time. One reports teaching three courses, four teach two courses, and one teaches one course. Four directors teach only occasionally, and all of those teach as adjuncts; teaching is not part of their regular duties as writing center directors. Two directors do not teach classes.

Support staff is lean; 15% of the centers have full-time secretarial/receptionist services; 15% share a secretary, and 70% have no secretarial staff at all. However, 54% of the centers have 1-5 lab assistants, 31% have 6-10, and 15% have 11 or more. Some of these assistants are full-time, while others are described as part-time instructors, work study students, an ESL specialist, and full-time instructors working regularly in the center. Budgetary matters are so diverse they defy classification. Almost every center reported only a portion of the budget, so it is impossible to give an overall average. What is clear is that the majority of the directors do not have full knowledge of the budget and that funding originates from a variety of sources.

Only one director reported the center's budget as being a flat "\$125,000 annually." This center is funded by the institution and the one-hour courses they teach. Other funding sources mentioned were student body, instructional, or departmental funds; learning centers; tutorial service or financial aid offices; edu-

educational and private foundations; grants; student support services; and FTE hours. Interestingly, this finding is different from Wright's, who reports that university centers tend to depend on "single source funding" (3). Community college centers appear to be creative in finding ways to maintain funding, although like universities, the centers appear not to be involved in fund-raising activities.

Two comments seem to sum up the situation: One respondent remarks that neither the director nor the dean knows what the budget is or who develops it: "This is a taboo subject here and is very much veiled in mystery." Another remarks: "The budget is fought for. It is never secure."

The centers sponsor a variety of activities. Seventy percent offer other support services to the college, and 30% do not. The activities include a variety of workshops, including subjects as diverse as autobiography, mechanics, writing for nursing, bibliography, proofreading, research, summaries, and computer use. Four centers support the literary magazine, three support the campus newspaper, three support an essay or poetry contest, and one holds poetry readings.

Tutoring Issues

Community colleges obtain their tutors from a variety of sources. Seven of the schools surveyed use peer tutors. They are undergraduate students at the school. Most of these students are required to have taken freshman composition and are frequently recommended by the English faculty. They generally are expected to have a high grade-point average and often help with computers as well. Two schools require an advanced composition class in peer tutoring. Salaries for these undergraduate tutors range from \$4.25 to \$7.40 an hour with the average being \$5.25 an hour.

Five of the schools use instructors or the equivalent (someone with a B.A., an M.A., or teaching experience but not regular faculty or center personnel) to handle their tutoring. In short, they have

no peer tutoring. Most of these instructors have M.A. degrees, although three schools have several instructors with B.A.s. Instructors generally make more than undergraduates, but are still paid an hourly rate ranging from a low of \$6 at one school to a more typical range of \$10 to \$13.50 an hour at the others. Other instructors tutor in the centers as part of their regular teaching load, and the directors of the centers, in all but one case, conduct some writing consultations. One of the schools has two volunteer community members involved in the tutoring process, and yet another hired a Peace Corps applicant looking for work before she was shipped overseas. Volunteers are rare. At only one school is the director also the only writing tutor. However, the Center is small, serving 400 users per year and open 24 hours a week. One school uses the Internet to provide peer tutoring between community college and university graduate students. The graduate students are not paid—they are involved in on-line tutoring as part of their own coursework and are partially graded on their consultation performance. They use a combination of e-mail and synchronous conferencing.

Tutors are trained using surprisingly diverse methods. These methods include on-the-job training; senior tutors training junior tutors; the use of workbooks and videotapes; credit classes in tutoring; weekly or monthly training sessions; readings on writing center theory; mock conferencing with the director or each other; writing center handbooks; sample papers; on-line documents pertaining to writing; and a log book to provide continuous training, feedback, and communication. Several of the respondents bemoaned the fact that their training seems so informal. A typical comment was, "I try to train the tutors, but the problem is, I can't pay for their time. The meetings are voluntary, and given how busy these tutors are with their jobs, families, and classes, gathering them together is problematic." Several center directors, however, indicate that their tutors are well-trained and express confidence in their abilities.

At one school, which primarily uses tutors to help students use computers while consultations are handled by regular center personnel, the respondent remarks that many of the same training issues apply to the computer tutors as would if they were writing tutors: "Today, much of the computer training overlaps into the writing training. A user will want to know how to set up a paper for class or how to create a Works Cited page. Or a user will be tentative about using a computer and allow that feeling to affect his or her writing process."

Space Considerations

The available space in most of the writing centers is taken up by computers, but twelve of the thirteen centers also have clear table space where students can work individually, in groups, or with a consultant. The square footage ranges from 2,500 square feet to 120 square feet, with the average space being 746 square feet. Four of the centers are part of a larger learning center.

The two the writing centers which are part of or adjacent to a larger learning center appear to be the least like the others in what might be called "writing center ambiance," a relaxed, user-friendly, nonauthoritarian place to work. One center, whose space takes up 900 square feet, has five instructor desks within the space. Beside each desk is a chair for the student. The other center, with 530 square feet, does have two round tables for conferences, but "a door from the library creates a fairly heavy traffic flow, and . . . evaluations indicate that the two most serious complaints are distracting noise and lack of space." A third center is off the main room of the learning center, but occupies a 10 x 12 foot space. The fourth center with shared space is described as sharing an area in Academic Resources, but it clearly has its own space, complete with a "small lounge area with a desk and chairs and comfortable seating for four."

The other centers are more likely to use the word "open" to describe their

spaces, even when space is at a minimum. In several cases, partitions or separate rooms are used to separate the computers from the consulting areas. Large tables, round tables, and bookshelves are mentioned. Several centers mention large windows and storage space. Another is a converted classroom and a half. The half-classroom holds a number of computers and printers, while the adjoining larger room has more computers along one wall with the rest of the room housing tables, a couch, and a front desk. "This layout," the respondent reports, "divides the talking-writing students from the ones who are typing papers on computers."

Computers

Eighty-five percent of the centers have computers in their writing area; only 15% do not. One center is networked; one is on-line, and another has requested both in next year's budget. Of the four centers who are aligned with a learning center, one has six computers, one has one computer, and two have none. The majority of the other centers reported having from 10 to 19 computers, and it is evident from remarks that several of these centers plan to use computers and writing in a more intensive way in the future. One of the centers which describes itself as "not on-line" nevertheless has access to Purdue's OWL. Another is already actively engaged in Internet tutoring and has recently updated their computers to exploit these new resources. Yet another center director remarks that several of the instructors at her school are "chomping" to teach on-line, but that they are waiting for adequate access. Most of the centers use IBMs (54%); 27% use a combination of Macs and IBMs, and 18% use Macs.

Software choices are also varied. Seven centers use WordPerfect and three use Microsoft Word with a variety of other programs reported. One school recently installed Daedalus, but it is not installed in the writing center. This is one of the centers adjacent to a learning center, with only one readily available computer in the center itself.

Evaluating Effectiveness

Student evaluations are the most popular method of tracking effectiveness, and 46% of the centers use this method on a regular basis; 23% distribute student evaluations occasionally, and 31% have no method of student evaluation, although one center does have a suggestion box. Only 23% of the centers survey faculty.

Of the centers who use student evaluations, three distribute the surveys annually, one distributes them at the end of every semester, one distributes two surveys (one written, one telephone) every four years, and one distributes them on an ongoing basis (surveys are available in the center). Of the three centers who also survey faculty, one surveys every five years, one surveys every four years, and one surveys annually.

Trends

One trend appears to be that of writing centers merging with learning centers. It is clear that all four of the writing centers in this position have maintained a strong voice of their own, but two other respondents mention that they fear a merger, and all four centers who have merged have encountered problems that the others have not, such as the director having numerous administrative responsibilities

outside the center, lack of computers in the writing area itself, or lack of space. Additionally, while two of these center directors were at the upper end of the salary scale, one was at the bottom. (The fourth did not report salary.) However, there are also clear benefits to being associated with a learning center. Someone else maintains and upgrades what computers there are, and the areas sometimes share support staff.

Another trend appears to be a fledgling desire to support emerging computer technology, although the majority of the centers do not appear to be actively exploring the use of on-line resources at present. Forty-six percent of the centers who participated in this survey, however, did so using e-mail. That fact, along with the survey information reporting the number of existing computers in the centers and future plans for their use, indicates that writing and computing are making the transition from an uneasy alliance to an amiable one.

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Note: A more detailed version of this article is available on the World Wide Web at Roane State Community College's On-line Writing Lab. The address is:

<http://fur.rsec.cc.tn.us/OWL/OWL.html>

Work Cited

Wright, Sharon. "Mapping Diversity: Writing Center Survey Results." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 18.10 (1994):1-4.

Conference on the Teaching of Writing

October 27, 1995

Fall River, MA

"The End of Writing"

keynote speaker: Donaldo Macedo

For conference information contact Jerry LePage, Chair, Conference on the Teaching of Writing, Bristol Community College, 777 Elsbree Street, Fall River, MA 02720 (508-678-2811, ext. 2282 or 2127).

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Grammar redeux, redeux, redeux

Welcome back to another school year and another year's worth of "Writing Center Ethics." The first two columns I have on tap this fall are a wrap-up of the series I began last year, the "Top Ten Reasons Why Writing Centers are Unethical." As you may recall, thus far I've dealt with issues ranging from the theoretical (cognition and disciplinarity) to the practical (grading equity and equal access). This month I want to confront an issue that bridges both theory and practice, an issue that has been dogging writing centers (and first-year composition courses and WAC courses and ESL courses and Basic Skills courses) for years. I am referring, of course, to grammar:

Reason #2: *Writing centers are unethical because they don't pay enough attention to the aspect of writing that most students have the most trouble with: grammar.*

Poor grammar is the "Peck's Bad Boy" (or "Bad Girl," if you prefer) of writing instruction. Not only is it disruptive in texts, standing out and calling attention to itself whenever it appears, but it seemingly resists most of our efforts at "correction." Virtually every teacher notices bad grammar in student writing, many delight in pointing it out (with the ubiquitous red pen), and most have strong opinions about its origins and implications. Some say it's a sign of a faulty education or a poor upbringing or too much TV. Others see it as evidence of our society's moral and intellectual degeneration. Whatever its ultimate causes and consequences, however, poor grammar skills persist as a problem that everyone's concerned with but that no one really knows how to solve.

No, I take that back. Almost *everyone* has some idea how to solve the problem of poor grammar. Unfortunately, few people *agree* on what the best solution might be. Some instructors advocate the drill and skill approach, some still ascribe to the value of sentence diagramming, some believe in a concerted program of reading and writing, and some, I suspect, probably think that we gave up caning as a pedagogical tool a bit too quickly. In any event, the sense of a grammatical crisis appears to be growing in this country and especially so among members of our own profession. At the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Washington, DC, this year, for example, I tried to attend a panel entitled, "Where Have All the Parsers Gone? Making Grammar Valued and Valuable" (Dennis Baron, Irene Brosnahan, Max Morenberg, Janice Neuleib, and Janet Ziegler, presenters), and was unable to get in the door of the conference room five minutes after the panel started. People were literally spilling into the hallway, straining to hear over the heads of others crowded in the door. I was told later by my colleague, Dennis Baron, that it was a "lively" session. Similar panels addressing similar grammatical issues drew similar crowds. I also have the impression that in the last few years I have seen more texts—research-oriented and instructional—that focus on the grammar/writing connection than I have in comparable periods over the last twenty years. This is just an impression, of course, not the result of any sort of investigative research, but just a quick look through my office library turns up books like Rei Noguchi's *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing*, Ronald Wardhaugh's *Understanding En-*

glish Grammar, Susan Hunter and Ray Wallace's edited collection *The Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction*, and Muriel Harris's *Prentice Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage*, a brief grammar handbook. The last two of these volumes are particularly interesting, since they were produced by writing center specialists.

These two books demonstrate, I think, the fact that those of us who work in writing centers feel an urgent need to address "the grammar question," partly because everyone expects us to, and partly because we have a vested interest in doing so. Grammar is an important part of writing, and we recognize that as well as anybody. Grammar problems can obscure meaning and cause readers to stumble, ruining the power and effectiveness of otherwise strong arguments. Even if we ascribe to the principle that the higher-order issues of organization, development, and tone should be our primary concern when working with student papers, we are also aware that grammar problems can affect matters of content, understanding, audience, and ethos. Besides, students are constantly asking us to check the grammar in their texts and to help them avoid all the grammatical pitfalls they seem to be constantly stumbling into. We can hardly ignore the concerns of these students or the substance of their requests.

The sense among faculty, expressed in the "reason" cited above, that we do *not* pay sufficient attention to grammar stems, I suspect, from three distinct causes: (1) the fact that some grammatical errors remain in student papers even after the writers have come to the writing

center for help, (2) the fact that some student writers continue to make grammatical mistakes in their writing even after coming to the writing center for assistance, and (3) the fact that writing center personnel expend a good deal of energy in their interactions with faculty trying to explain why grammar instruction and correction is not, and should not be, *all* that we spend time on in student conferences.

At one time or another, we have all had to respond to the first and second of these bases for attacks on our services and general competence. We typically answer the first by citing how little time we have to work with students and how a half-hour or hour-long conference is rarely enough time to address all the problems that a particular student paper might have. Would the instructor rather get a paper with a few comma splices or a paper with an incoherent thesis? Most teachers are willing to concede, when pressed, that they would rather a paper made sense, but this concession is almost always followed by the standard lament, "But someone should really DO something about the atrocious punctuation these students use!" We typically answer the second mode of attack in a similar fashion, citing the unlikelihood that a few half-hour sessions in the writing center will miraculously make up for all the grammar instruction that didn't seem to "take" in the first twelve-or-so years of the student's public school education. And if that approach doesn't work, we can always spice it up with more theoretical language about "unfamiliar discourse communities" and students trying to "negotiate textual spaces" for themselves with resultant "infelicities in surface structure."

The third occasion for doubt about the seriousness with which we approach grammar is a bit more difficult to deal with because it comes as the result of our own rhetoric. As we have come to define ourselves largely in terms of the process paradigm for writing instruction, we have also felt it necessary to repudiate the myth of our product-centered ori-

gins—the "writing labs" from which we sprung and whose primary emphasis was the correction of grammar and form. While this rejection may have been necessary and somewhat cathartic for writing centers in the broadest institutional and psychological senses, it has no doubt remained greatly misleading to instructors and administrators outside the writing studies community. Though we have never given up grammar instruction in student conferences or cast it aside as meaningless or unimportant, it is nevertheless easy to see how our process-centered pedagogical focus could be misinterpreted as an expression of that very belief.

The best we can do, I suppose, is to continue in our role as apologists and to correct these misconceptions whenever they arise. I am sympathetic to teachers who express frustration with their students' grammatical difficulties—hey, I have to read a lot of their papers too—but I also have to be firm in my conviction that grammar errors are generally the least important of the writing problems that appear in most student texts. I cannot and will not ignore grammatical issues when I judge them to be important, but my mission in the writing center, your mission in your writing center, any instructor's mission in any classroom situation, is to prioritize responsibilities: What can I do to achieve the maximum benefit for a particular student or group of students in the amount of time I have available? Under some circumstances, that might entail close, extensive attention to grammar; under other (most) circumstances, that will entail attention to other matters. I believe that this criterion is entirely consistent with an ethical writing pedagogy, and—I would hope—it would find favor even among the staunchest advocates of a product-focused program of writing instruction.

Michael A. Pemberton
University of Illinois
Urbana, IL

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations (WCAs)

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

Oct. 19-21: Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association, in Spokane, WA
Contact: Anne Mullin, Idaho State University Writing Lab, Box 8010, Pocatello, ID (208-236-3662)

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

March 8: CUNY Writing Centers Association, in Brooklyn, NY
Contact: Kim Jackson, Writing Center, Harris Hall Room 015, City College of New York, 138th & Convent Ave., New York, NY 10031

The personal literacy history: A great jumping-off place

When considering the six years I've worked in the Writing Center as coordinator and tutor, I remember certain assignments in the initial tutor training class that made a big difference in my approach to students. Writing a personal literacy history was the most important exercise, the best jumping-off place to begin reading others' work, because in the writing, I began to see myself in perspective and in a context that affected who I am as a writer and tutor today. I also began to develop an appreciation for all students who came in to the Writing Center for help because they too had histories that impacted their abilities and potentials. I offer my own example here as an illustration of how effective writing a literacy history can be for tutors.

This is a condensed version of the assignment our Writing Center director gave us: "Spend about forty-five minutes writing a draft reflecting on how your family and cultural background have helped shape your literacy and your sense of what it is to be literate. How was written and spoken language used in your home, the community to which your family belongs and the culture with which your family identifies? How did your family share with you their attitudes toward spoken and written language? How specifically did those attitudes help shape you as a reader and writer and shape your ideas about literacy?"

I received this assignment with anticipation, a freedom from the usual constraints that accompany writing a major paper. Discovery was ahead. The other students involved in the training were eager to read each others' lives and to put copies of their writing into an office anthology. Up until that time I hadn't composed much on the computer, prefer-

ring instead to copy from what I'd written longhand on a yellow, legal-sized pad. But once I began typing I soon forgot what my hands were doing and what was going on around me as cascading words led me back up the carpeted stairs into my 1950's bedroom with the messy bookshelves and the record player surrounded by story records, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Pinnocchio*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*. Once again I wandered into the living room by my parents' bookshelves and reverently touched the bindings before removing *The Mustangs*, a book in a soft leather cover containing lovely pen and ink drawings of wild horses galloping through a dusty arroyo. The book's words promised a fascinating story, but they were beyond my comprehension. I knew that one day, however, I would be able to read the story for myself.

My grandparents also had an intriguing library of books with a rainbow of colorful jackets, but my great Aunt Alice had the best one with rare, first editions in locked glass cabinets. I could look at them, but they were never brought out. She had inherited the collection from her father who had gotten it from his father. Other less valuable editions, however, were within reach and accessible to young hands. I especially liked looking at the ones with illustrations sprinkled throughout the pages. Every night was story time, no matter if I was at home, at Grandma's or at Aunt Alice's. My family took the time to read aloud.

The other significant factor in my literacy history was the importance of moving pictures. My father worked for Fox Intermountain Theaters in Denver, designing and building concession areas and erecting drive-in movie screens. Ev-

ery weekend he brought the latest 16mm films home for private showings. As a family we also went downtown to Denver's big theaters to see musical extravaganzas like *South Pacific* and *The King and I*, comedies with Laurel and Hardy and later, all the Rock Hudson/Doris Day films. On Saturdays friends and I spent the whole day in the local theater watching westerns, cliffhanger serials, and all the episodes of *The Little Rascals*. As we watched the kids in the *Rascals* put on plays and musicals, we knew we could do the same thing in the big barn in my backyard. So we turned it into a Hollywood production studio, spending every day creating stories with costumes, songs, even dances so that our friends could also invite their parents "to see the show."

In writing literacy history, I saw that many sources—the written, spoken, and acted-out word—had molded me from a curious, imaginative child into an adult who still has a passion to set the stage, create the scene and bring on the actors for a good show. As I reread the paper forty-five minutes later, I had a profound sense of satisfaction seeing my life condensed there on the pages, and a deep gratitude to my family for providing me the immense quantity of rich material for inspiration decades later. I was eager to share my story with colleagues and to hear theirs. The give and take between us that followed solidified us as a team and launched our tutoring careers with a new perspective, a fresh confidence, and a real empathy for our clients.

Looking back on it, I believe that completing this assignment helped in several ways:

- The other tutors and I got acquainted and began our working

relationship by reading our pieces aloud.

- The instructor got to know us better.
- We were introduced to steps in the writing process.
- We gained a fresh enthusiasm for writing that we could pass on to our clients.
- And most importantly, we were sensitized to the impact that literacy histories have on all writers. We realized that our

writing reflects influences from several contexts and that, therefore, our clients' work does also. Their papers are not simply a mass of problems fit for red ink. They evolve from specific family and social backgrounds.

Each year the editor of our Writing Center journal *wordwork* publishes one or two of the writing assistant's histories prepared in the tutor training course, to inspire our readers to look into their own

pasts and find the many ways reading and writing have impacted them. Most of us in the Weber State University Writing Center have found that writing the literacy history is a very effective way for tutors to count their blessings as well as to prepare for the following days working in the Center.

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Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association

Oct. 19-21, 1995
Spokane, WA

For more information, contact Anne Mullin, Idaho State University Writing Lab, Box 8010, Pocatello, Idaho, phone: 208-236-3662; e-mail: mullanne@isu.edu

CUNY Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals
March 8, 1996
Brooklyn, NY
Keynote Speaker: Ann Raimés

Proposals are due Nov. 10. Please include type of presentation (workshop, panel, etc.) and title; name(s) of presenter(s) and position(s); institution, address, telephone (home or office); three copies of proposal (maximum 250 words); 2-3 line abstract to be used in the program. Mail to Kim Jackson, Writing Center, Harris Hall Room 015, City College of New York, 138th & Convent Ave., New York, NY 10031 (e-mail: kijcc.cunyvm.cuny.edu). For information, call conference co-chair: Lucille Nieporent (708) 369-5405.

Midwest College Learning Center Association

Sept. 27-29, 1995
Evanston, Illinois
"Joining the Conversation: Sharing Perspectives Across Learning Communities"
Keynote Speakers: Mike Rose and Mary Jante

For more information and conference costs, contact Anna Hammond, MCLCA President-Elect/Conference Chair, National-Louis University, 18 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60603 (312-621-9650 ext. 3307)

TUTORS' COLUMN

Stepping out: From tutoring to business (learning business skills in the writing center)

Two worlds co-exist among many on this planet. One is the world you are in now: the world of the academic. Some of you will continue to live in it after you graduate, and you will remain blissfully isolated from that other world for the rest of your life. You will go to work in your tweeds in a quiet, windowless office crammed with books, and in the mornings, carrying three of those books and your third cup of coffee, you will walk long, musty halls much like those you are walking now, and you will enter a classroom that reminds you of the one where you took freshman English. But instead of looking for that seat at the back of the room, you will stand at the front of it, staring into twenty-five expectant, freshly washed faces, and you will begin to teach.

But many of you will step out into another world on graduation day, never again to hear your footsteps echoing down the corridors of academia. The world you will enter is a world apart, completely different from the world of colleges and universities: it is the world of business. In the mornings, you will drink your third cup of coffee in your BMW, on the way to an office crammed with ringing phones and computers and fax machines, or on the way to the airport, where you will board a plane for Seattle, or Chicago. You will wear not tweeds but silk, carrying not books but briefcases down carpeted halls that lead to plush offices with walls of windows, Oriental rugs, and Levelor blinds. In that other world, the business world, two sets of skills will make you successful—those you learn in the classroom and those you only learn by practicing them.

I have owned a business writing service since 1983, but I have moved in

various circles in business for twenty years. I have worked with lawyers, CEOs, telecommunications executives, computer wizards, sales executives, advertising magnates, doctors—you name it. And what I can honestly tell you is this: the skills you are learning right now as a peer tutor will automatically make you better suited to enter the business world than I was, or than those students who do not have the benefit of your training.

Let me illustrate with some real-life examples. In my business I am, among other things, a public relations writer. The difference between this job and tutoring, of course, is that I do the writing, rather than teaching someone else to do it. Nevertheless, the first part of any writing process is the information-gathering part. In my job, I interview, interview, interview. As a tutor, you know that some people have an easier time talking than others. Some students will talk without much prompting, while some won't say anything because they're afraid it might be wrong.

Well, the skills you're learning to help you get a nonfluent speaker to talk—or a nonfluent writer to express himself on paper—are the same ones I use when I interview the people I write about. I try to make them feel comfortable, try to find out something about them personally, before I start asking the questions I came to ask. If the first thing I did when I walked into someone's office was to sit down, pull out my legal pad, and say, "Now, Dr. Brown, tell me about your trip to the Capitol yesterday. . . ." it would be about as effective as telling a student writer, "Look, you've got eight dangling modifiers and sixteen comma splices here—this paper is terrible!"

The bottom line, then, is tact, diplomacy, sensitivity, warmth, trust—in essence: communication skills. You can learn the theories from a book, but you can't learn the skills except by practicing, by making mistakes, by paying attention to what works and what doesn't—what makes people warm up to you, and what makes them defensive. Tutoring gives you the opportunity to practice the art of communicating *before* you have to use the skill in a business setting, where you can't afford to make mistakes because your salary depends on your success.

Another skill you practice as a tutor that will take you a long way in business is flexible thinking. When I say "flexible thinking," I mean the ability to change direction in the middle of a session when you discover your usual techniques are not working. In my job, changing direction might mean changing my angle, after I've worked with a piece for two hours and still can't get past paragraph three. If you were in sales, it might mean changing your strategy, once you intuit that you are pushing your client away, rather than drawing him toward you. In tutoring, it can mean taking five different approaches to introductory phrases before the student finally, at the end of the session, catches on. Flexible thinking means always being attentive to whether your technique is effective; it means being unafraid to try other tactics until you find one that works.

Alongside flexible thinking go problem-solving skills—one of the most important skills an employer looks for on a resume. In the business world, problem-solving skills means, first, seeing that a problem exists; second, figuring out how to solve it; and third, implementing a

workable solution. In my business, it often means priority-setting: analyzing the importance of the work, deciding what has to be done today, what can wait until tomorrow, then setting deadlines, then following through. In manufacturing, it may mean taking a poorly designed product back to the drawing board—or, at another level, locating a non-working part, reconfiguring it, and replacing it. In advertising, it may mean determining which market to target and writing an effective ad.

In tutoring, problem-solving means diagnosing the writing problem, sometimes with the least possible amount of information, sometimes determining *which* writing problem should be addressed first. Then it's finding a workable solution by determining the effective pedagogical approach for that student, then demonstrating results through the student's writing. Having to accomplish so much in so little time, a tutor learns quickly what works and what doesn't—she doesn't have time to experiment. She learns to assess problems instantly, choose working solutions, demonstrate results.

Two more skills you learn as a tutor will earn you respect in business. Both have to do with tolerance. The first is developing your tolerance level; the second, learning to maintain your composure under pressure. In my job, I run into people every day with ideas that vary widely from my own. Even my editor and I have different ways of looking at the world. Nevertheless, if I want to keep my job, I accept his view—not for myself, but simply as another way of seeing. Tutors, also, have to put up with uncomfortable ideas. You might be pro-choice, for instance, but the student you are tutoring, pro-life. But if you are an effective tutor, you learned quickly that you cannot impose your moral judgments over the students you teach. You are there to help that person express his own, not your, way of looking at the world. Tolerance for other perspectives is another one of those skills you can't learn from a book. You have to practice it, you have to develop your sense of hu-

mor. Tutoring gives you that opportunity, to practice and develop your skill of tolerance.

Tutoring also provides a place for you to practice maintaining your composure. A client of mine—a lawyer—once threw something at me. I threw it back. Our business relationship did not last long. If you are the boss, and you get mad and start shouting, your employees may mumble apologies but then they'll talk about you later around the coffee pot. Resentment will build, and efficiency will decline. When you are tutoring, a student may shout at you because he's upset over a grade, mad at a professor, or mad at his girlfriend. It's hard not to take it personally, not to shout back. People under pressure often react emotionally, rather than respond rationally. But this is a skill an effective tutor learns—not to react, but to respond; to maintain her balance until emotions cool and the situation can be discussed in reason, not anger. She knows that an angry tutor can do irreparable damage to a student, to the reputation of his tutoring program, to her own reputation, and to student attendance at the writing center. She learns to set aside her pride. She learns to maintain her composure.

A few other skills a tutor can learn are how to work with a team of tutors, how to construct work schedules, and how to manage a daily concern, like a writing center. And I cannot stress enough how important to your success in business is the development of your own writing and computer skills, which you hone as you teach them to others. All other communication skills aside, your ability to write quickly, cleanly, clearly, and effectively is the single most important skill you can bring with you into the business world. I could not even count the number of high-level businesspeople I have worked with over the years who could not write an effective business letter, whose grammar and organizational skills fell far below the English 101 level. If as a tutor you can develop the skills to write not only well, but excellently—if you can walk into the business world knowing how to compose a persuasive letter, a

provocative article, a sound business proposal, you will be light years ahead of your competitors who can't.

There is one basic philosophical difference between business and tutoring that bears discussion: in practice, business is not generally pedagogical. Tutoring is all pedagogical. In some businesses, for instance, like business writing services, advertising agencies, and public relations firms, you do a thing *for* a person; in tutoring, you help that person learn to do the thing for himself. In other words, tutoring is more nondirective than directive. Tutors help students discover their own creative genius and then teach them to put that genius to work. Tutors send students away with pages of ideas and the exciting prospect that they can now function on their own. Business, on the other hand, is directive, requiring a decisive, direct, certain approach. Anything less fosters doubt, and that's the last thing you want in the mind of a client.

The danger for a tutor stepping into a business environment, then, is that she may tend not to be directive enough. She may send a client away prematurely with the new car brochures, expecting him to come back the next day with a decision he has made on his own. A tutor needs to be aware of this potential conflict between tutoring and business and be able to use his "flexible thinking" to change his nondirective approach to a more authoritative one, as he determines the business situation may require it.

By the same token, the nondirective approach of the tutor can be, at the right times, an asset in business. Nothing is more annoying to buyers than a too-directive salesperson—think about your experiences in clothing stores or at car dealerships. The important thing is to know which technique works in business, at which times. So, here's what tutoring can teach you about business:

- (1) tact, for information-gathering (how to get people to talk to you);
- (2) flexible thinking (how to break your attachment to the idea that there is only one way to do something);

- (3) problem-solving skills (how to diagnose problems, uncover workable solutions, and demonstrate results);
- (4) tolerance (developing your sense of humor);
- (5) composure (how to keep yourself together in an uncomfortable situation);
- (6) teamwork and management skills;

- (7) awareness of approach (non-directive or directive); and
- (8) better writing and computer skills.

Ultimately, if you will pay attention to the way you teach, learn from the mistakes you make, and watch the way your writers respond to you, your experience as a peer tutor can teach you all these

skills and many more. Then when you step out on graduation day into the world of BMWs and Oriental rugs, Levelor blinds and silk suits, you will be taking with you the keys to a satisfying career and a bright, successful future.

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CAI: Instruction and change in the writing center

Five years ago, when computers were first placed in the Community College of Denver Writing Center and students began to get lost in them, I didn't understand what was going on. I was afraid that we were losing our writing center and becoming a typing lab. However the absorption of these working writers eventually convinced me that students were learning as they wrote at stand-alone computers and that it was very exciting learning.

One of the things I think students are learning is that text is fluid, not fixed. Student writers at computers learn that text is protean and that writers construct meaning rather than imitate forms. This is a fundamental assumption for experienced writers but is not taught directly in most writing classrooms. Instead, it remains tacit knowledge, sometimes further hidden by the emphasis on fixed forms, conventions and rules. Many other realizations about the work of writing follow from or are linked to this understanding, including subtle realizations about the writing self, the writing task, the written product.

This is a concept which remains very abstract and difficult to put to work without word processing. But the fluidity of text suddenly emerges as the central

truth of writing when writers use word processing. It becomes so much a part of the writing process that students don't need to realize it consciously to learn its implications. My central point is that they are learning this without the intervention of teachers or tutors. They learn it because it is possible. This is part of the hidden curriculum of the word processing program. This is not an abstract concept in a textbook, but a real potential, offering inexperienced writers a chance to work much more like experienced writers who have trained themselves to take apart and put together text using only mind and imagination.

The second thing I think student writers are learning is that the process writers go through *is* recursive. I think students learn a lot about this in conferences with teachers and tutors, but they can actually do it with word processing. Students can be composing at the edge of their text one minute and rearranging or refining inside the text the next. Both process and product are emerging, and product seems so much more immediate and close. Writers who work at computers do not know what to answer when they are asked what draft they are working on. They no longer think in terms of separate, discrete drafts or of stages like planning, writing, and revising. With word

processing, inexperienced writers can truly begin to explore their own writing process, and, chaotic as it may be, they can begin to reflect on and manage it.

The insights above seem obvious now that I can articulate them. They are plain as the nose on my face, right in front of my eyes. Yet, it has taken time to arrive at these insights. Most of the realizations I have had about computers and writing have been that subtle. It seems to me that, among other things, we are slow to see the obvious because the vocabulary we use to talk about writing is the vocabulary of paper-based, traditional instruction. It sounds plausible and familiar, but it masks what is really going on. For example, when we say that students who write on computers are *learning revision*, we are masking the fact that they are learning much more fundamental truths about shaping text and about how the work of writing is done. When we sit down to tutor a student and ask *what draft* they are working on, we are masking the fact that students who write at computers can and do write with a fully recursive process.

What good is it to know what the computer is teaching students—or to have hypotheses about it? Now that I think I know what students are learning, I am

(cont. on page 16)

Rethinking writing center conferencing strategies for writers in the disciplines

Writing centers claim collaborative learning as a distinctive feature of their environments. Typically, this collaboration is described as an interchange between the writer and the writing center staff member, a one-to-one relationship in which, as Muriel Harris says, "the writer and the tutor remove themselves from that other traditional world of teacher and student, the one in which the student is expected to remain passive and receive what the instructor gives him" (21). Richard Leahy's definition of writing center collaboration adds a significant dimension to this description: "When a tutoring session is under way, there are three characters involved in the dialogue: the tutor, the client, and the draft (not to mention the instructor, hovering invisibly over them all)" (47). Leahy's parenthetical remark about the invisible, hovering instructor highlights a disturbing negativity in the typical understanding of the one-to-one conference. If we perceive the social world of the writer—containing instructors, fellow students, and other members of the discipline—as a dangerous place, the writing center becomes a safe house. In a multidisciplinary writing community, however, the writing center cannot realistically function as a safe house, since doing so discourages essential conversation among the members of the community it proposes to serve.

The most significant trend in the University of Wyoming Writing Center during the past several years has been to move from perceiving ourselves as a safe house for writers toward creating a community center for all disciplines. As recently as five years ago, we followed a model conferencing approach derived

from the process theory and "writing to learn" strategies described in Stephen North's well-known definition of writing centers. Gradually, we began to realize that, although this approach successfully assisted many writing center clients, it provided inadequate assistance to an increasingly large group of writers in the disciplines.

We were most disturbed to discover that our model approach encouraged physical and psychological isolation from the rest of the campus writing community. We talked about our positions as third members of a three-person collaboration that included the writers and the content area faculty; however, we implicitly and metaphorically saw ourselves as a haven, a place apart from the storms of the academic writing community. We viewed the writing center as a supportive place where writers could escape from the demands of the classroom and talk about writing itself. This dialogue involved a one-to-one discovery process in which the writers who came to us would learn to draw on their own resources to answer their questions and thus become increasingly self-sufficient. Because this aspect of the writing center can be so powerful for both the writers who need sanctuary and nurturing and the frequently marginalized faculty who work with them, it has a momentum of its own that is hard to overcome. In embracing the separateness of the writing center conference, however, we unintentionally conveyed two impressions about writing and writing center conferencing that would prove increasingly troublesome: (1) that the mysterious, sometimes therapeutic, process in which we engage *can* and *should* be private and (2) that a

generic, all-purpose rhetoric, of sorts, underlies academic writing and awaits discovery through our model conference approach.

This all-purpose, discovery approach to conferencing can clearly help writers with writing anxiety or writing process kinds of questions, but it does not help, and it may even dangerously mislead, writers with discipline-specific questions. Typically, these writers cannot participate in a discovery process through which they answer their own questions, since the resources they bring to us are inadequate for that purpose. Nor can we as writing center faculty forego our usual Socratic methods and answer their content area questions directly, for we are often ill-equipped to do so with confidence. In this situation, our conceptions of the writing center as a safe house and the writing center conference as solitary and private are dangerous, since, by closing out the rest of the university community, we isolate ourselves from the people who know the answers to the students' questions: the faculty in the disciplines.

A new writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) program that began on our campus in the fall of 1991 increased conferences with research writers in the disciplines and accelerated changes in writing center conferencing patterns. The inadequacy of our traditional approach to handling many of the problems of these writers was further underscored by the fact that at least one quarter of this new group of WAC clients were second-language (ESL) writers. Conferencing strategies based on standard rhetorical assumptions were even less likely to be

fruitful for these ESL writers than for native-speaking writers. In order to create a writing center that would fully serve the multiple discourse communities in a WAC program, we needed to identify and understand situations where our customary one-to-one approach could not lead writers to satisfactory solutions to their problems.

One spring semester provides the following typical cases to illustrate needed changes in our conferencing techniques:

- A) A mechanical engineering student working on a lab report includes tables, but does not discuss those tables in his text. His question: "How much discussion is enough?"
- B) A political science graduate student has an oral assignment to write a five-page summary and analysis of five chapters of a book. Her question: "Should my paper contain equal amounts of summary and analysis?"
- C) A marketing student is confused by a written assignment that requires both in-text citation and endnotes in a case study using MLA documentation. Her question: "Does my instructor really mean a List of Works Cited, not Endnotes?"
- D) An ESL graduate student in geology asks for assistance in revising a dissertation on which his advisor has written, "Problem of language. See the writing center." His question: "What does my director mean?"
- E) A Korean graduate student asks for help in revising a thesis prospectus. At the top of the draft, the advisor has written "What is your research question?" The student does not understand what revisions the advisor expects. His question: "How do I correct this?"

Each of the above situations placed the writing center faculty in a context where traditional conferencing strategies would prove ineffective. To provide meaningful help to the writer, we needed either to understand the instructor's intentions or to understand the conventions of a specific discipline. Experience told us the following: that writer A's engineering professor might expect *either* a lot or a little discussion of results presented in tables, that writer B's political science instructor probably had definite expectations about the proportion of summary to analysis in her assignment, and that writer C's marketing instructor was as likely to mean "endnotes" as "list of works cited." Experience also told us that the advisor of geology student D might see the same "problem of language" we see—or might intend something quite different by that phrase—and that writer E, an international student struggling with an unfamiliar culture, language, and rhetoric, might be unable to describe accurately what his advisor hoped our collaboration would accomplish.

In each of the above situations, an appropriate principle or direction *did* exist for the writer to discover. However, the relative ignorance of both participants in the writing center conference prevented discovery through traditional writing center methods. The discovery-based approach to conferencing depends, first of all, upon the writers' "knowing" but not recognizing the answers to their own questions. It also depends upon writing center faculty having a reasonably good idea of what writers must discover so that they can provide direction and reinforce appropriate discoveries. Here, neither writers nor writing center faculty have the tools necessary to make the discovery-based approach work: the writers cannot generate answers and the writing center faculty cannot frame leading questions or recognize appropriate solutions. Faced with this kind of uncertainty, most writing center faculty hesitate to reinforce student assumptions about expectations in format and content or acceptable revisions. We cannot an-

swer the questions "Is my language precise enough?" or "Does my lab report describe everything it should?" because we do not know the content area; we cannot answer the question "What does my instructor mean by a summary analysis" or a "problem of language" because instructors develop their own specific approaches to achieving general objectives and use the language of writing in their own ways. As writing center faculty, we fear leading writers astray by encouraging them to follow their instincts when we cannot know if their instincts are "good."

From analyzing the above conferencing experiences, we have learned that, when we call ourselves a full-service writing center, we must mean more than simply a willingness to serve a full population and variety of writers. To say, as we do in our advertising, that we work with "all kinds of writing tasks," we must come to understand that producing a piece of academic writing involves more than using the writing process in its broad, generic context. The problems of brainstorming, drafting, and revising exist in the context of disciplines with complex histories, assumptions, and forms; they also exist in the context of the individual professors who interpret those disciplinary assumptions and set the specific objectives for their students. Disciplinarity, as reflected in the varying demands of the multiple discourse communities our writing center serves, demands that we broaden our role if we are to serve the university community fully and effectively.

Creating more effective strategies for working with writers across the disciplines has involved expanding our definition of the collaborative process so that the writing center naturally shares the conversation about writing with many readers. Having realized that writers often come to the writing center with disciplinary audiences whose expectations both we and the writers grasp dimly, if at all, we now understand the limitations of our customary approach in solving their problems: these writers need a writing

center that is not so much a nurturing place as a place where they can begin to understand the tensions and conflicts of their disciplines. Often, they want us not to outline a writing process for them but to help them find a way back into the worlds of their disciplines where they can discover the answers to their questions.

Our conferences with these writers may seem, on the surface, quite different from those we conduct by more traditional methods, but the coping strategies we teach writers through this process will actually lead them in the same direction, toward increased self-sufficiency. Self-sufficient writers must be able to discover what they already know, but they must also learn how and when to rely on other writers and written sources for assistance. In contrast to Thomas Hemmeter, who concludes that the classroom exists to "get students back to the writing center, the traditional site of language instruction" (44), we have concluded that, in a multiparadigm, multidiscipline writing community, a writing center can be only *one* place where writing instruction occurs, not *the* place. We must teach student writers to go back "out there" for information if they are to be successful.

In practical terms, we have begun to realize that we assist student writers in the disciplines most effectively when we highlight and clarify the actual three-way collaboration that exists when those writers come to the writing center. Although always conscious of the content area instructor's role as "audience," the writing center once underplayed it, probably to the point that the other two collaborators seldom saw any three-way partnership at all. Our motives for doing so were justified, based on assumptions about a generic writing process and writing to discover: we did not want to hamper insecure or hesitant writers with the notion that writing problems have *answers* (i.e., rights and wrongs). This approach works well in situations that are truly generic, where the audience does not have specific expectations. We mis-

lead both writers and faculty, however, if we extend these assumptions into the clearly nongeneric writing contexts of the disciplines where audiences do have specific expectations, formats, requirements.

To help all three parties to the collaboration become more aware of their roles, responsibilities, and resources within it, we have spent increasing amounts of time working with writers across the disciplines to define questions which neither they nor we can answer so that they can go back "out there" and discover their own answers. Often, this involves sending them back to their instructors with a clearer knowledge of which points need clarification. The political science graduate student in example B, for instance, cannot discover, even with writing center assistance, the parameters of her summary/analysis assignment. By helping her frame a question for her instructor, the writing center helps her acquire the information most critical to successfully attempting the assignment. Through this process, she may also experience, and therefore absorb, the important point that writing is usually judged successful when it meets the needs and expectations of its intended audience. Making the framer of the assignment aware of the three-way relationship may also have a positive effect since she will see that at least one student has had difficulty understanding the assignment as presented. As often happens, that exchange may trigger self assessment and strengthen the instructor's presentation of writing assignments in the future. Thus, an expanded collaboration assists both the writers trying to learn the expectations of their disciplines and the faculty across the curriculum trying to incorporate opportunities for that learning in their courses.

Such collaboration becomes even more important in situations like that of the marketing student in example C, where an instructor has provided the writer with a confusing, even contradictory, request. By directing the writer back to his instructor, the writing center

makes the instructor aware that, through whatever oversight in editing or confusion in terminology, a substantial difficulty exists in some aspect of his written assignment. He can then correct that confusion for the benefit of the whole class. The process of helping this marketing student understand the reasonableness of his confusion and frame a clear and productive question for his instructor is especially important, since he is in a difficult situation. Getting the information he needs requires pointing out an error or oversight on the part of a person he will not wish to offend. In helping him understand and respond effectively to this situation, however, the writing center undoubtedly leads the writer toward greater self-sufficiency than it would if it tried to help him guess what his instructor really "meant."

We also broadened the collaborative process in another, even more significant, way by greatly increasing our direct contact with faculty across the campus whose students we see frequently. The mechanical engineering student in example A was actually one of over thirty writers from that course who came for conferences on lab reports. Discussions with their professor clarified for us his objectives and expectations for the students and enabled us to direct their conferences more assuredly and effectively. At the same time, our contact with the professor convinced him of our interest in and ability to assist him in teaching writing and helped him see what additional help his students needed to learn successfully. With the lab manual he produced for his students in response to these discoveries, we are now able to answer writer A's question about the amount of discussion expected, simply by opening to the examples and reviewing them with the student. Acquiring manuals, written assignments, style sheets, and sample papers from instructors across campus helps us establish fruitful dialogue with that third leg of our collaborative triangle.

During spring semester last year, our writing center conducted a pilot study

with graduate thesis and dissertation writers and their advisors to formalize this triangular collaboration even more. Previous semesters had seen the number of graduate research writers requesting our assistance increase to the point that they filled several hundred conferences a year. Our difficulties in dealing with these writers were further complicated by the fact that approximately half of them were ESL writers who sometimes had culture-based communication difficulties beyond simple facility with the language (Kaplan). Often in the past, we worked with these writers on problems of basic grammar and correctness by default, since, even when we sensed larger problems, the content, conventions, and expectations of their disciplines were too unfamiliar for us to tackle with assurance. Unwilling to accept correctness as the only kind of assistance we could provide to graduate research writers, we created an experimental program that formalized the triangular relationship of writer, advisor, and writing center for all writers requesting assistance with graduate theses and dissertations. Following a writer's first visit, the writing center contacted the student's content area advisor to discuss where in the thesis writing process the writer was, what the advisor believed needed to be done, and how the writing center might help both writer and director to complete the writing project. This three-way relationship then continued, as needed, throughout our work with the writer.

Opening this line of communication seldom tapped in the past provided immense benefits to everyone involved in the three-part collaboration since it enabled us to work more effectively and meaningfully with graduate research writing. Having discovered, for example, that geology student D's "problem of language" in the earlier example mainly involved transition and flow (not voice, tense, sentence structure, diction, or correctness), we could confidently provide the specific assistance he needed. Achieving this clear understanding of the specific revisions writers needed to accomplish was an obvious re-

sult of our dialogue with thesis advisors, but it was an extremely important one. Whereas, under the past system, we frequently hesitated to reinforce student assumptions about necessary revisions or to offer substantive suggestions, we could now help student research writers in unfamiliar content areas tackle and solve their central writing problems. Armed with the information, for example, that a writer's introduction lacked focus, we could use our collaborative approach to teach the writer strategies for defining focus. Told that a writer's content was fine, but that it was poorly organized or presented in an inappropriate voice, we could address those problems. Bringing content area advisors directly into the process also made conferencing more comfortable for both writing center faculty and students. The writing center could direct conferences more confidently, and graduate students could trust writing center assistance more fully because of the three-way collaboration. Both efficiency and confidence are, of course, key concerns in revising longer research documents like theses and dissertations.

Formalizing the collaborative triangle in graduate student conferences also greatly increased our ability to assist international graduate students. Granted, many of the ESL writers we see come to us for assistance with typical second language problems—missing articles, confused tenses, misused idioms. A substantial number of these writers have additional writing problems, however, in focus, organization, coherence, or voice. Furthermore, having been educated in cultures with rhetorics quite different from ours, they may find it difficult to grasp these weaknesses, even if their advisors explain them fully; and they may find it even more difficult to explain them to us. When we add the fact that most content area advisors have understandably little expertise in assisting struggling writers and perhaps no awareness of the implications of contrastive rhetoric, we begin to understand the true complexity of the ESL writer's difficulties. This was, in fact, the situation of

the Korean graduate student in example E. Writer E, believing he understood what his advisor wanted him to do, initially asked for the "wrong" kind of assistance from the writing center. The level of miscommunication that existed, without either party's knowledge, could easily have led to wasted time and effort for all involved—and no solution to the original writing problem—if the writing center had not contacted the advisor. We have discovered that graduate thesis and dissertation writers in general, and especially those for whom English is a second language, are not always able to convey what they really need to accomplish. Like other writers, they may ask for one kind of assistance, but actually want or need another. When freshman composition students ask about punctuation but really mean focus or structure, we can usually spot their confusion and lead them to first problems first. In unfamiliar disciplines, however, we can seldom locate those situations with confidence; we must rely on the help of the content expert.

Initially, we saw broadening our conference strategies as a limitation, a shrinking of our discretionary powers. Instead, expanding and formalizing perceptions of test audiences and resources have freed us in certain ways. Perhaps the most significant is a new freedom from the need to fall back, as our student writers so often do, on the one thing we know we can consider if all else fails: sentence-level correctness. Collaboration with content area faculty and their students provides us with information essential to adapting the writing process to needs across the disciplines. Our experience of the past year has convinced us that writing center faculty are members of a complex collaborative community, the nature of which is sometimes hidden by the assumptions of the model one-to-one conference, and that effective conferencing in this context must involve all members of that community.

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CAI

(cont. from p. 11)

happy to let them go into that concentrated absorption characteristic of writers at the computer. Also, I can intervene much more intelligently because my theories give me a richer perspective from which to tutor. When I thought that students were learning nothing or only learning word processing, I expected to be asked either a writing question or a technical question when I tutored in the Writing Center. Now that I understand how empowering word processing software is as an environment for learning to write, I analyze every question to better understand how individual students are integrating their technical, procedural and conceptual learning. Now that I am beginning to learn how to make these more complicated diagnoses, I think carefully about how to intervene and how to nudge learning along. The possibilities are rich, and the more experienced the student is as a word processor or writer, the more interesting the tutoring session becomes.

In summary, now that I have a clearer sense of what students are learning as they work at stand-alone computers, I am a much more effective and responsive teacher and tutor. With computers, our Writing Center is, more than ever before, an environment which supports students as they build their own intellectual structures and pursue their own hypotheses about writing. In this setting, the unique contribution of the computer is that some kinds of thinking, which are foundations of writing, are made visible. Beginners can and do learn by doing. Once we begin to name what they are doing and learning, we can begin to intervene in the learning process much more effectively, and we can begin to train other tutors and teachers to do the same.

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THE WRITING LAB

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