

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 20, Number 10

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

June, 1996

## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

This month's newsletter offers you a wealth of perspectives and suggestions for innovations in your writing lab next fall. To start us off, Becky Bolander and Marcia Harrington delve into crevices in a tutorial that can be more productive than task-oriented tutorial talk. They find gold in moments that are revealing and important, moments we might otherwise overlook. The key is to listen, a skill whose importance reverberates through other articles in this month's issue and leads to the kind of trust Dawn Evans Radford describes as necessary to encourage writers. Individual growth is also the result described in the two Tutors' Column which detail for us the personal journey tutors take as they work with students.

This month's newsletter also brings Volume 20 to a close. Right now, we're all busy winding down the year, getting our reports ready, and planning for next fall. Until we convene again—with September's issue—I wish you a summer filled with long, languid, relaxing days—and moments with other crevices filled with gold. Take care.

Muriel Harris, editor

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## Reflectivity: Finding gold in the crevices of tutorials

Recently, a student who was attempting with little success to rewrite an analytic essay, looked up, sighed and began talking about the many frustrations she faced at her job the evening before. I immediately distinguished this as an "aside," as something that was necessary for Joanne to do, but that didn't play a major role in our tutorial. During this gap in the tutorial, I felt myself anxious to get back to the substantive part that would yield the results we both desired. My attention level shifted as I kicked back into my "not-as-active" listening posture.

Part way through Joanne's narrative, I began to listen more intently, especially when she talked about the charting she had to do as a nurse. She related that nurses "chart" daily, which, she informed me, consists of writing down all interactions with patients, including treatments and medications that may be administered, along with other pertinent "objective" information—specifically, observable, unbiased behaviors and developments. Charting required that she steer clear of generating assumptions about a patient's condition.

Slowly, the value of this information began to emerge. I realized that the task she was undertaking (analysis of literature) required precisely that kind of enterprise Joanne had been specifically trained *not* to do. As we looked at her writing again it was obvious that Joanne had done a excellent job of being objective and factual, but when it came to analyzing the literature and making inferences Joanne's training made it difficult for her to comprehend writing in this way. In her view, writing was a task in

orderliness, conciseness and, most of all, objectivity. Yet, the analytic piece she was working on required that she do almost the opposite—elaborate, connect ideas, and make inferences. I had no doubt that these were skills within Joanne's capability, but clearly they were not showing up in her paper.

I suggested to Joanne that her training as a nurse and the daily activity of charting may be interfering with her ability to do this assignment. We then centered our conversation on the specific differences between the kinds of writing she did in her daily routine and the analytic writing required for the assignment. We were able to make great headway and more importantly, Joanne again felt more competent and revitalized about writing. Moreover, she recognized that she *did* have writing strengths (which she came in to the Writing Center questioning because of the grade she had received).

Joanne's discussion about her experiences as a nurse proved central to this tutorial and not simply as a digression for what we "really" planned to do. We, as tutors, need recognize that students come to our writing centers with experiences that are going to affect their writing. Part of the tutor's role is to discover ways to transfer those experiences into useful and accessible writing strategies.

#### What IS the GOLD?

"Gold," in tutorial terms, includes those valuable insights, glimmers of deeper understanding, or that sense of "aha!" we realize as we reflect either during or after the tutorial. These treasures are easy to miss if we work too linearly or listen too "lightly"; if we allow ourselves to think that only certain kinds of talk or processes are legitimate or productive in tutorials; or, if we judge certain digressions or issues students bring to tutorials as only marginally important. Gold in tutorials, may come in various forms, but is usually found in the "crevices" we are likely to skim over as we at-

tempt to move "on" to, or "back" to more productive—or predictable—parts of tutorials.

"Gold" may be found in those conversations we have with students before the tutorial actually "begins." As we talk to students about how school is going, about their majors, and as we attempt to make them feel comfortable, they may reveal useful information. For instance, we may note the passion a student exhibits when talking about a particular subject—art, music, or cooking. We may recognize the contrast in expression of ideas between one of these categories and the expression of ideas in a paper they bring to us. Sharing this observation with students may help them find new angles for their papers, but more importantly lets them know they have strengths and often gives them the confidence they need to write. This kind of listening and conversing with students about "off the topic" subjects may reveal the nuggets that are most useful, but most easily overlooked if tutorials are expected to stay focused in only certain directions.

"Gold" may also be mined as we notice a particular aspect of a student's writing that is very strong. For instance, I remember Erin who was asked to write a five-page paper (for a composition class) about a hypothetical character. When she came to the writing center, she had over seven pages of writing and simply wanted to cut it down to the required number of pages.

We began reading her essay. I was impressed with the way Erin seemed to be able to know what this character would say, do, and feel in the hypothetical situation she created. About a third of the way through, however, I noticed that everything she had written focused on the character's interior life. Though Erin had done a superb job of "getting into the depths of the character," I realized that there was no specific event to focus the essay. This presented two problems: (1) Erin did not know when

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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.

she had accomplished her purpose and, (2) the writing was confusing and hard to follow. Clearly, the paper did not fulfill the expectations of the instructor. I shared my observation with Erin emphasizing how thoroughly she had been able to understand the feelings of her character. Much of her paper included descriptions like the following: "She felt as if she had been wrapped in cotton. Sounds, smells, and even colors were muted. Time lost its even flow and had an elasticity that made her feel boundless . . ." Though very descriptive of the feelings of the character, the endless narrative of feelings eventually became routine and frustrating to the reader.

Erin had done an excellent job of getting inside her character, but needed help finding concrete illustrations within which to situate those ideas. Asking Erin for concrete details about the relationship of her "character" to others, pushing her to imagine names, physical characteristics and situations helped Erin focus her attention. Erin remained confident about her writing, while also having a very specific direction for revision. Because she had sufficient feedback about what to do next, she confidently guided the tutorial through the reminder of our work. Even our observations of student methods of working may be ways to mine gold in tutorials. As we tutor we may register, and perhaps lament, the extent to which students find it necessary to include details about the way they have obtained information for a paper:

"Let me show you the book I got this from. Maybe you'll understand better then. I went through and wrote down everything related to the symbols in the book." (The student produces an astounding accumulation of papers and information. He goes on to show how he has organized his information.)

Tutors often consider these times as relatively unrelated to the matter at hand; they do not directly make the paper any

better. They may, however, clue us in to a "preferred" method of working and therefore indicate strengths available in students' writing. The student who produced the massive amounts of research had a good system of organization and collecting data; he was thorough and exacting, but he did not employ this ability in his writing. As is true for all of us, often we do not recognize our abilities and therefore do not employ them effectively. We may also not identify skills as transferable from one task to another.

Gold may also be found in other unlikely crevices. The venting a student does about something frustrating—school, instructors, or assignments—may be revealing. We may share what we observe by saying, "You use very expressive words when you talk about that class, have you tried incorporating that kind of language into this paper?"

Last fall when working on a paper with Bonnie, who was having a discouraging (to put it mildly) time getting started on an assignment, we were involved in discussing what the assignment entailed. I fruitlessly attempted to reroute the conversation so I could better understand (which I felt I needed to do) the specific requirements of the assignment. As the tutorial came to a close, I felt discouraged and felt as if nothing had been accomplished. In a break later that day, still thinking about the "failed" tutorial, I wrote an alternate tutor report—one that I could not place on file, but that seemed to most accurately reflect what had actually taken place. I didn't hold myself to any requirements; I simply began to write. Since I was overwhelmed by the emotional content, I began there:

Words that come to mind—  
insecure, tense, flailing, confident, but unsure of what, anti, delight, but fear in rebelling, HURT, but wants to find that space that is her own, fear of failing, wants to find reason or excuse for not being able to start, stubborn, unbending, but

thinks she's flexible, calm, almost tearful at times. Stated several times, "I don't like being told what to do, what to write." But when asked, "Okay then, if you could write about anything you wanted, no restrictions, what would it be?" she was unable to come up with anything.

Later in the tutorial when I asked why she didn't want to put down her very insightful ideas about the difference between being spiritual and religious, she recalled a class discussion where students had made light, took wrongly her ideas—she (Bonnie) was less than compassionate—"stupid kids" she called them. She then recalled an argument with a Sunday school teacher about baptism and being saved—a first-grade incident where she had to stand six hours because she would not do her work—she never did it! (She stated this very proudly.) She is now talking about dropping out of school, getting tested for a learning disability.

After this, we wound our way back to the assignment.

She was to identify some way Black Elk, from the book with the same name, speaks to us today. I asked how she felt Black Elk spoke to society or to her specifically. Immediately she told me she was very familiar with this type of literature (Indian) because she had studied it for so long. But, she stated emphatically, she felt she couldn't write about religion and spirituality because . . . she still didn't know enough about it. She then went on to say Black Elk was important because he put community and family first which was very different from the American way of life—individual and "me" first. She then narrated several stories from her own life where a

member of her family had helped others and put their needs above their own. I posed the possibility of beginning her paper with these narratives and later tying them together with the idea we had talked about. She seemed to understand how this fit, but still didn't want to work with it. Once again we talked about where she wanted to go with this, but . . . she still held back.

I felt the need, at this point to affirm her "personally" and to push her to force herself to write something and then come back. . . . she was reluctant, no . . . she wanted to . . . but she didn't. She then stated she had never quite understood what a thesis was—we talked about this as well as general organization of paragraphs. I asked her where we should go from here. She stated she needed some time to think and possibly write . . . she then started talking about creative writing she had done and related the idea behind a story she had written. She seemed to want to talk about her successes . . . A lot going on . . . what to do?!

As I wrote, I found myself attending more closely to the narrative of Bonnie's experiences. In this act, instead of shaping the tutorial as I imagined it should be, I listened more carefully to the divergences, the concerns that reoccurred, and the emotions that I endeavored to screen in the session. I began sorting and focusing on all the aspects of the tutorial and formulated a way to work with Bonnie in the next session.

I came to the conclusion that our tutorial really began at the end of the session—with the admission Bonnie made about her uncertainty of what a thesis statement was. The doubt that Bonnie had a lot to write about, but her frustration stemmed from not being able to begin—she did not have a clear under-

standing of how to control her topic. Equally important was the fact that it had taken the whole hour for her to be able to say this.

The next time I worked with Bonnie I was careful to model several thesis statements and provide her with several examples of how to organize her material. I felt it was necessary not to threaten her, or put her on the spot because of the previous insecurity I recognized, and because of the reluctance she demonstrated in admitting what she perceived to be a grave weakness.

"Extraneous" conversations—crevices, while they may not appear to pertain directly to the assignment, can disclose myths students carry with them concerning writing. In Bonnie's case, I believe she felt she should have already known all about thesis statements; not knowing seemed to be an unforgivable deficiency.

These crevices in the tutoring process can tune us in to the reasons we may not be communing with students, or can explain why a student may continually have a block toward a certain kind of writing or assignment. Mining the gold may be precipitated through probing the asides or using them to develop innovative ways to work with more complete knowledge of the student. The critical catalysts in successful mining endeavors include reflecting on difficult or unexpected tutorials as potential areas for the emergence of insight; considering *any* information—even if it appears unrelated; slowing down so we can access different and new information; and attending to the dynamics underlying the superficial appearance of the tutorial. These include considering the visual, auditory, emotional, and tactile responses of students.

The gold, however, often does not only benefit the student; frequently, the tutorial changes us. There are times when too much happens in a tutorial to unravel it immediately. One of our tutors notes

the valuable information she has unearthed about herself through writing the following alternate report (given in part):

The student told me up front that she felt insulted she had to come to the Writing Center. She knew how to write and had no interest in using the tutorial in the conventional way: brainstorming, expanding ideas, logical construction of paper and so on. However, I note, she stayed for the allotted period of time!

What she essentially did was vent her anger at being in a course in which she saw no value. She felt she had been misadvised; and said she didn't need the grade for the continuation of financing her program . . . .

After half the session had gone by, I realized we weren't going to get into the paper. She had no interest in revising, collaborating, or talking about possibilities for the paper so I relaxed the inclinations to focus on reworking the paper. Eventually she got back to the assignment, and I was able to discuss with her the difference between a summary and a conclusion. She decided she would turn the paper in the way it was and take a lower grade!

The tutor then reflected on what she had written:

Reflecting on sessions such as these reveals what we are up against, the enormity of the situation, factors affecting the so-called "success" of a tutorial. I think by refraining from joining in/ collaborating with her judgment about erroneous advisement and instructor requirements, not trying to force the situation (my opinion, suggestions), her frustration was spent, at least momentarily and we were able to refocus. For me the

gold was that I was able to stay "with her" the whole session. In that I mean that I exercised patience in not being too directive, she was able to come to a decision about what she really wanted to do. I stayed with her, but out of it! This session reminded me of an earlier one in which the student needed to condense a paper. Because I knew what we needed to do, I spent the whole time trying to help her shorten, restate, and rework to get her paper from 2-1/2 pages to only two pages. Throughout she wouldn't even look at the paper. Without saying it, she seemed to imply that I wasn't listening to her. I think she wanted to hand the paper in the way it was, but was afraid to risk doing so.

Through reflection on the first, I was able to learn to handle the second differently and really listen and be comfortable with letting the

student shape the tutorial and be responsible for her choices.

Though this tutor recognized she had a clear idea of what "successful" tutorials are—making papers better, she reflects about how she resists the urge to do only that and instead listens to the student. In the first case, the student vents about a particular class, and in the second, the tutor lets the student talk about the consequences of *not* revising. In both cases, the tutor lets the student make choices not only about revision, but also about how to shape the tutorial. In the second case, this meant not revising and instead spending time exploring the consequences of that action. This tutor became more comfortable with a tutorial of a different shape, and was able to define it also as "successful."

Realistically, we must realize that we cannot always have our tutorials fit nicely into thirty-, forty-, and sixty-minute parcels. They will not always be

linear and they will spill over into our lives. Sometimes we may feel, as many tutors can attest, that we have been talking in circles with our tutee—but perhaps that is the nature of learning. Ultimately, we must realize that *everything* that happens in a tutorial is potentially useful and that it may well be the crevices that offer the most useful riches.

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Marcia Harrington  
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## WCJ EDITORSHIP

The *Writing Center Journal* invites applications for a new editor(s) beginning with the Fall, 1997 issue. Though WCJ currently has a single editor, the *Journal* has a history of co-editorship and thus invites applications from prospective editing teams as well as from individuals.

Applicants should be able to demonstrate an understanding of current writing center issues and should show a commitment to and have a record of publication in writing center scholarship. Applicants must also submit a letter of support for WCJ from their home institution(s). The WCJ editor(s) serves a three-year term, which may be renewed.

To apply for this position, send a letter of interest, vita, samples of your

writing, and a letter of support from your institution to:

Christina Murphy  
NWCA President  
Texas Christian University  
Box 297700  
Fort Worth, TX 76129

Applications must be received by October 1, 1996. For more information about the position, contact:

Dave Healy  
University of Minnesota  
General College  
140 Appleby Hall  
Minneapolis, MN 55455-0434  
612-625-1541  
healy001@maroon.tc.umn.edu

## OOPS....

In the May 1996 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* (vol. 20, no. 9), there was an error in the spelling of Kelly Childs' name. She and Leigh Ryan authored the lead article, "Dollars and Sense: Compensating Writing Center Tutors across the United States." Kelly was inadvertently listed as Kelly Child. If you cite that article, as I'm sure many of us will, as we make our cases for higher tutor wages, please note that she's really Kelly Childs (note that final "s"). Apologies to Kelly. We're still hunting the missing "s" in her name which is rumored to have evaded our spell checker by slipping off the page and attaching itself to some cute little "o" seen in the neighborhood.

Muriel Harris, editor

# Becoming a creative writing center

Our best ideas often grow gradually, the suggestions and insights from all the people who inhabit the writing center. When these ideas finally cohere, we are sometimes surprised by how long we took to recognize the obvious. In 1990, two tutors held a workshop for "closet creative writers"—not one of whom came out. Then last year, a student poet kept approaching us about the needs of the writing community, as though she felt there was something we could do. This year, the two of us (a director and a tutor) started exchanging our expressive work and found ourselves in an atmosphere already half-built to accommodate creative writers. It had dawned on us that it was time to actively initiate a program designed for these writers.

Writing centers, too often, are forced to work against an image associated with remediation. Fortunately, at the University of Tampa we believe we are seen as serving more than any single category of students. After devoting ourselves to dispelling false notions, among them that we exclusively served the needs of the English department, we began to realize that we might not be reaching the *creative* writers across the university. While students in composition, business, or science classes were encouraged to use our resources, the students in fiction or poetry classes were ignored. We were forced to ask ourselves why a writing center—a place dedicated to promoting both the enjoyment of and excellence in writing—should disregard those students perhaps most concerned with the same ideals. It became clear that we needed to establish ties between the writing center and the creative writing program, proving that the center truly serves the entire spectrum of writers at the university.

The three strands of our department, literature, writing, and composition, have

divided us unnaturally. All English faculty teach composition, most of us teach literature, and a few of us teach poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction, so there is cross-over at the faculty level. (The genres are blending so much now that it is reasonable to ask why distinctions are needed.) Students frequently double-major, in English and Writing, too, so there aren't clear divisions at that level, either. But somehow divisions remain, and the writing center, in spite of our efforts to draw all writers, has wound up supporting the composition program best.

At a time when our university is losing students, English majors among them, and when we are hearing from writing majors that there is no community for them to be a part of, we can't afford to perpetuate the impression that we are a resource for only *some* students in the department of the university. So while enhancing the center's image by creating a new initiative, we hoped we could unify the campus writing community, as well. When we became a more widely used resource by poets and fiction writers, we would become the locus of writing activities on campus that we have long worked to become: the real *center* of writing at the university. How ironic it was to recognize that while many people outside the university call us thinking we are exclusively a center for creative writers, we had actually been reaching out to every group *but* those students. And since many of us in the center are writers (of poetry, drama, fiction, creative non-fiction), we wanted to increase our work with writers like ourselves.

By incorporating services geared toward the creative writers at the university, the writing center can provide those students with a varied and intensive educational experience. One could easily argue that the educational needs of the cre-

ative writing student are unable to be met in the classroom alone. These students need response from their peers, perhaps more so than any others. They need to interact with other writers in order to find their own direction and voice. And they are in need of resources beyond the rudimentary handbooks and guides to the writing process; many are ready to begin sending out material for publication and need someone or some place to teach them how to do this properly.

In order to fulfill these needs, we began what we called our "Creative Writing Initiative," which includes inviting creative writers to bring their work into the center, staffing the writing center with prominent creative writers, co-sponsoring readings for both students and well-known authors, and offering workshops to prepare writers for readings and publication.

The writing center can begin to meet these needs by hiring tutors with experience in creative writing and urging writing students to come in for the same type of peer review they would receive with a term paper. When we started this initiative, we had on our staff three prominent creative writing students, which accounted for half our tutors. Not only did they help in giving credibility to the writing center as a good place for writers to bring their work, but their presence in classes encouraged and reminded fellow students to bring their work in. Next year, with two creative writers on the staff, we feel we'll have an array of majors represented, while still providing a strong enough base for our creative writing program.

Another effective way we let writers know about our program is through our newsletter. A year ago we began issuing

an inexpensive, two-sided newsletter reporting on the various services offered at the center. We offered general information like hours and policies, as well as lists of special interests of staff members, recommended reading, and writing tips. This would be, we realized, a natural vehicle for news about events and services for writing students. In it we announced the special events held as a part of our new initiative, the creative writers on staff, and a special call to writing majors to bring their work in.

The writing center can sponsor frequent informal readings on campus, so that more students are given the opportunity to read their work in a comfortable setting. In Tampa, there are a number of readings held off campus, but they can be intimidating to young writers without any previous experience with public readings. Readings held on campus provide students with a familiar environment in which to challenge themselves, as well as much-needed support from faculty and peers. Previously, only two readings were held each year, both during the spring semester. We felt students needed the opportunity to be heard on a regular basis and decided to arrange our first campus reading in the fall with the university's literary journal *Quilt*. Not only did this help us to establish ties with the existing writing community, but it also eased our minds to know that we could collaborate with an organization that had held readings before. Flyers were posted around campus, an announcement was made in the campus newspaper, and faculty were sent reminders to mention the reading to their classes. Faculty also were urged to read their own work. The turn-out of over fifty was better than expected, with at least twenty-five students and faculty reading late into the night.

Another feature of our fall program was a weekly showing of the Lannan Literary Video Series. We invited the university community to come to the writing center every Friday afternoon at 2 p.m. to view one of the great writers from the series reading and discussing

his or her work. Interested students and faculty, and even entire classes, came in to see such writers as Alice Walker, Octavio Paz, Adrienne Rich, and Larry Heinemann. Afterwards, we served light refreshments and held informal discussions. We not only assisted the department by screening the new collection, but we introduced students to many new writers, as well as giving them a closer look at ones they already knew. This was also a great way to promote ourselves as a literary venue on campus.

The center can also begin to build a library specifically aimed at the needs of creative writing students. Early in the planning stages, we began collecting and ordering a number of literary journals. We now hold in our collection issues of *The New England Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and *The Gettysburg Review*, among others. We also acquired a variety of books about writing fiction and poetry, such as Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*, Nancy Mairs' *Voice Lessons*, and a collection of interviews with distinguished teachers of writing, *Conversations on Writing Fiction*. We bought current editions of the *Novel & Short Story Writer's Market* and the *Poet's Market*, as well. We advertised in our newsletter the availability of these resources and invited students to use our library. As we already had a number of books for composition students, a special section was designated on our bookshelves for the new collection. We hoped that students would come to the writing center for the resources they needed to prepare their work for publication. Again, by housing these literary resources we furthered our efforts to become a true center of writing and literature at the university.

A final feature of the program that we're still working on is sponsoring faculty-led seminars or discussions aimed at the specific needs of a young writer. We are currently asking faculty members to speak about topics within their specializations that they generally only touch upon in classes. One seminar scheduled for the close of the spring semester will

help students plan a productive summer of writing. A faculty member will offer strategies for a self-disciplined writing regimen for the months without the structure of classes, suggest a number of publications which read submissions during the summer, and announce writing workshops from around the country, such as the Iowa Summer Writing Festival. Other seminar topics may include specific genres, such as creative non-fiction or travel writing, particular writers or texts, and recurrent issues in writing, for example form or revision. We feel that by sponsoring these seminars we will create a forum in which individuals can exchange ideas outside the classroom milieu, as well as building a stronger learning community.

Already, we've seen many signs of success. One result is a closer working relationship with the student literary journal, made apparent by a letter in the student newspaper lauding the results of our combined efforts from the editor of the journal. After our first reading, a number of faculty and students congratulated us on our success and assured us of their continuing support. The chair of the English department has been enthusiastic and encouraging about our program, attending many events and thanking us for the many ways we are helping to build community in the department and throughout the university.

It seems essential that creative writing students be given a forum in which they feel comfortable about sharing and reading their work. They ought to be encouraged to interact with each other outside of the classroom, and they need a place that offers resources suitable for them. If their needs are fulfilled, alongside a wide array of classes, the university will succeed in providing its budding creative writers with the exceptional education they deserve. The writing center—if it wishes to live up to its name—should be at the very heart of this enterprise.

Lisa C. Birnbaum and  
Cathleen Kaufmann  
University of Tampa  
Tampa, FL



## Midwest Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals  
October 4-5, 1996  
Minneapolis/St. Paul  
*"The Place of the Writing Center in the 21st Century"*

Request a form on which to submit proposals for individuals and panel presentations, workshops and demonstrations, think tanks on issues and strategies from Ginger Young, Central Missouri State University, Humphreys 120, 320 Goodrich Drive, Warrensburg, MO 64093 Proposal Deadline: June 30, 1996.

## Midwest College Learning Center Association

11th Annual Conference  
October 2-4, 1996  
Indianapolis, Indiana  
*"Circles of Learning"*

MCLCA's membership includes approximately 400 learning center educators and administrators. For conference registration information, call Luanne Momen: 419-530-3140; fax: 419-530-3194

## Workshop on Writing Centers in Engineering

July 15-17, 1996  
Columbia, SC

The Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering Writing Center, of the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, will hold a workshop on July 15-17, 1996, that focuses on the programs the writing center has developed for engineering students. However, much of the material is also applicable to writing programs in other disciplines as well. The workshop will be particularly pertinent for satellite writing centers serving specific professions and academic disciplines. The workshop describes ways to teach writing in engineering and to create cost-effective writing center programs.

For more information including a brochure describing the workshop and a registration form, contact Elisabeth M. Allford, ECE Writing Center Director, 803-888-5604 (alford@ecc.sc.edu) or Sheryl Hudgins, Business Associate, 803-777-7990 (shudgins@ecc.sc.edu), or write to ECE Writing Center, Dept. of ECE, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208.

## Conference on the Teaching of Writing

Call for Papers  
October 25, 1996  
Fall River, MA  
*"Practicing Theory"*

This conference will explore the ways theory influences classroom practice as well as how what happens in the classroom changes our approach to teaching composition. For information on possible presentation topics and proposal format, contact Jean-Paul Nadeau, Bristol Community College, 777 Elsbree St., Fall River, MA 02720; 508-678-2811, ext. 2445. E-mail: jp.nadeau-tasc@nova.novanet.org



# TUTORS' COLUMN

## Tutoring as a revision of self

I had been told tutoring would change my life, but, to be honest, I thought that was a bunch of hooey. I knew working in the center would make me a better writer, but a better person? No way.

But as I came to know the writers who came to the center, both experienced and less experienced, I also came to understand their personal struggles, their personal trials and their personal triumphs. And as the semester progressed, I found myself growing more patient, growing less judgmental, just plain growing.

Very seldom did I struggle to write. For me writing was a way of getting to know myself, and that was an exciting and fulfilling activity. In the October 1994 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Carlene Pote wrote about her experiences as a natural writer, in her tutors' column "What Do You Mean, 'There is No Writing Fairy'?" For Pote, the writing process was an enigma; she sat to write, and the paper practically wrote itself, almost as if she were taking dictation rather than creating a piece herself.

For the most part, I work the same way. But sometimes I struggle: I have a feeling, an emotion, but no vocabulary to express it. Sometimes I can almost feel myself drifting apart like debris in space, floating in the stuff I wish to capture, but unable to grab it. In these instances wishing for the writing fairy is like wishing for immortality: impossible.

And as I sat in the center this past semester, I spoke to students who felt that same unanchoredness every time they wrote. When I really listened to these writers, I found sympathy inside myself where there had been none before.

One day a woman came into the center dragging her two small children with her. She had been to the center several times without making much progress, and I wasn't too eager to get to the session. The woman was distracted and kept sharing her personal stories with me. I smiled a lot and kept redirecting her toward writing.

Then, about half way through the session, she stopped and asked me if I would send a note to her instructor to say she had been to the center. I said I would, and to my surprise, she exhaled a deep shuddering sigh. Then she breathed, "Good. I want her to at least know I'm trying." The pain in her voice was so obvious I could only look at her. Seeing my confusion, the woman explained that her instructor had told her she would never pass the class and should quit. Then I heard that woman's voice grow deep and stubborn as she slowly said, "I ain't gonna quit. I got children. I ain't gonna quit."

Like the Grinch Who Stole Christmas, my heart grew three sizes. I'd never experienced such respect for a person. A mere twenty minutes earlier she had been just another client with bad writing skills; but, BLAM, she was Joan of Arc or Gandhi, a vision of pure will.

Ever since, I've been wary of casting even silent judgment. The experience made me patient with poor writers; it made me realize I could never grasp the depth of a student's commitment in a few short sessions when the student had a lifetime to develop the commitment.

And that trek into a nonjudgmental lifestyle changed me. The center was a

place for me to grow, without having to measure my success against another's failure. The center was a place where I could succeed by helping others succeed. How nice.

Michele Wade  
Peer Tutor

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## How-to handbooks in the real world

I embarked on my first tutoring experience armed with several how-to handbooks and a felt-tip pen. Having read the manuals thoroughly, my mind whirled with ideas to help undergraduate authors produce fantastic writing, and I considered myself well-prepared to respond to each anthropology paper I'd been assigned.

Once I actually began to read, however, my confidence level plummeted drastically. Encountering a severe identity crisis, I could not define my role as a tutor, and I wondered how I could possibly learn to be an effective revision tool for students. Furthermore, how could I possibly conference with the students after reading their papers? I was terrified! Dismayed, I asked the walls around me, "How can I suggest improvements without removing the author's ownership of this paper? Why am I so tempted to completely overhaul this draft? How can I read a disappointing piece objectively? What will I say during my conference with this student?" Suddenly, I entered the real world of tutoring and realized that despite all I'd read, no universal

how-to model would prepare me to be an effective tutor. Anthropology papers in hand, I was essentially on my own.

Discouraged but not defeated, I decided to reread the papers. This time, I looked beyond the words on each page and tried to consider the needs of the students. One piece sounded like a choppy transcription of notes taken in class, and I asked myself, "How can I help this student come up with ideas to create a cohesive, meaningful essay?" Another draft contained no supporting evidence and hadn't been proofread. How, I wondered, would I demonstrate the importance of credibility and revision?

These and dozens of similar questions helped better prepare me for conferences, and I approached the appointments determined to provide more than a few band-aids for one soon forgotten assignment. Considering myself a coach rather than a paramedic, I wanted to help students discover writing and revision techniques applicable to every assignment, and I eagerly awaited the arrival of Brent, my first "tutoring victim."

As I watched the Wrangler-clad student swagger toward me and take a seat, however, I immediately sensed that he was not as eager as I to discuss his writing style. At first fierce-eyed and silent, Brent was intimidating, and I dreaded spending fifteen minutes prodding him for responses and dodging his perpetual glare. Still, I vowed to give him a chance and opened our conference with small talk about his anthropology class. Immediately explosive, Brent cursed his professor and complained that he hated the class, didn't understand the writing assignments, and had no idea how to revise his piece. Since I had several ideas for him to consider, Brent begrudgingly scooted a bit closer and examined the comments on his draft.

"What do you mean I need more examples? What's wrong with this sentence? How—Oh, I don't even care. I can't write anyway!"

(cont. on page 16)

## In praise of time's winged chariot— The limited tutoring session

The University of Miami Writing Center limits its sessions to thirty minutes. The policy allows for a second session on the same paper IF the student makes hand-written changes on the hard copy of the paper on the portion no tutor has seen. Our students are generally well satisfied with the assistance they receive, but when they complain, they complain about the time limitation.

Therefore, for more than the creative method of teaching writing, I was overjoyed to read Joy A. Farmer's article, "The Twenty-Minute Solution: Mapping in the Writing Center," in the March 1996 edition of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* (vol. 20, no. 7). It meant that some writing centers are even more draconian than mine in my relentless pursuit of the thirty-minute session. No one has suggested that I cut ten minutes from the ideal session, but some people press for a longer or an open-ended one.

I learned the value of limitations in the classroom while teaching a unit on speech-giving. Nearly every student felt qualified to deliver a speech without any real preparation—until I confined each speech to three minutes, plus or minus ten seconds, and armed myself with a stopwatch. Suddenly I saw the value of time limitations: Students had to practice to meet the time requirements; there was no other way to comply with the stringent time requirements. Now I see benefits similarly arising from limiting the time of a writing center session. Tutors move along quickly, finding the most crucial area or areas to discuss. The time limitation forces them to focus.

The thirty-minute session minimizes modeling or editing. In some sessions, the tutor has too great an impact on student writing, but the thirty-minute re-

quirement obliges tutors to limit their involvement. Moreover, limiting the modeling to a paragraph or two stimulates students to take responsibility for at least a part of their paper. Because students know they themselves will have to correct much of their own paper, they are more apt to focus on the instruction of the session. They pay attention because they must.

Thirty-minute sessions are ideally suited to students' limited attention span. Needy students, those whom tutors tend to over-tutor, have especially short attention spans. If it were possible for them to learn everything in an hour, they would already know it; especially these students profit from short, frequent sessions.

From a purely practical standpoint, short sessions assist a writing center as an administrative unit. Shorter sessions mean more sessions. Those monthly and annual reports of attendance figures will reflect more sessions each day, to the great joy of the bean counters.

Thus thirty-minute sessions allow—even encourage—efficiency both in learning and in teaching. In viewing them, I am reminded of the architect hired to design a church. The congregation's serious financial limitations forced him to devise a prize-winning design using extremely cheap materials. He said that the limitation helped him to direct his thinking and to formulate the blue-ribbon concept. He viewed the limitation not as a restriction but as a focus. In exactly this way, I see time limitations in a writing center.

Charlotte Perlin  
University of Miami  
Miami, FL

# Trust in the writing center community

In a friendship poem, the poet Nikki Giovanni describes a warm relationship: "I will never miss you / because of what we do / but what we are / together" (88). For Giovanni and the special person in her poem, something happens in their togetherness—that something called community. As friendship works best in an environment of community and sharing, so does the writing process with collaboration and trust.

Peter Elbow, in *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*, explores a writing-process philosophy of two-heads-are-better-than-one. According to Elbow, writing community is collaborative learning, which occurs when

I say something, you give a response and it constitutes some restructuring or reorienting of what I said. Then I see something new on the basis of your restructuring and so I, in turn, can restructure what I first said . . . we each successively climb upon the shoulders of the others' restructuring, so that at each climbing up, we can see a little farther. . . ." (41)

In standing on another's shoulders, we necessarily engage in a communicating, or a reciprocity, of trust. Interacting in a one-on-one writing conference, a student observes her words' influence on her reader. If she can be persuaded to write to a reader prepared to believe her in sympathetic alliance, she has the potential to become much stronger and clearer, more direct and firm in her writing. Even in the event of a "wrong reaction," she can make improvement in her communication skills (287). However, she needs first an atmosphere of community and trust.

One popular contemporary novel has as its theme the positive nature of power

present in collaboration and mutual trust. In *The Celestine Prophecy*, James Redfield explores through the medium of fiction how community occurs and thrives embraced by a dynamics of biological energy and reciprocal trust. Redfield's members of a modern utopian world recognize and respect the sharing of energy between people. His protagonist learns that for the individual in conversation, "one of two things can happen. That individual can come away feeling strong or feeling weak, depending on what occurs in the interaction" (70). Too often we try to prevail, to outwit and control each other because of the psychological lift this control may afford us: "This is the reason we see so many irrational conflicts in the world both at the individual level and at the level of nations" (71).

Redfield writes that in controlling others, we rob them of vital energy. "We fill up at the other's expense and the filling up is what motivates us" (71). Rather than seek to control, we should learn to respect and appreciate the other person, for in appreciating his "shape and demeanor," we focus on that person until this shape and demeanor "begin to stand out and to have more presence, [and] we can send them energy, lifting them up" (201). The more we can appreciate the wholeness of a person, the more our energy flows into the other, and the more energy returns to us (201). Redfield next echoes Peter Elbow's theory of collaboration in conversation:

Because you are giving me more energy than I would have otherwise, I can see what my truth is and more readily give it to you. When I do that, you have a sense of revelation about what I'm saying. This leads you to see my higher self even more fully and so appreciate and focus on it at an even deeper level, which gives me

even more energy and greater insight into my truth and the cycle begins over again. (Redfield 201)

Redfield hastens to clarify that this reciprocal action of energy does not equate with co-dependency. Co-dependent behavior may begin like this, but will deteriorate into control when the "addiction" cuts off the source of the energy, for true "projection of energy has no attachment or intention," only two people anticipating messages (201). According to Gary Olson, this anticipation of message and sharing of energy is vital to the writing center conference. Here, he writes, "is a sharing of power, accompanied by the recognition that since we are all learners, we are all capable of being teachers and that teaching and learning are not separate but complementary activities" (xii).

David Taylor cautions consultants to take care that their own expertise doesn't cause them to dominate the tutoring session. Taylor approaches the writing center conference from the position of the psychotherapist. As in psychotherapy, writing conference failures may result from a lack of interpersonal skills or from inability to share responsibility with the client. These failures may signify a tutor's lack of trust in the student. According to Taylor, it is the tutor's responsibility to establish an atmosphere of trust, primarily by listening and understanding. The learning of knowledge itself is a social construction, which in the writing center requires interpersonal skills accompanied by interest in the student and awareness of the student behind the text (24). Beyond helping the student learn to trust us, Susanna Horn writes, our alertness to the needs and talents of each writer can help us "open our minds, close our handbooks, and have faith in [the student's] intelligence" (109). Taylor writes that the "creation of an atmosphere of acceptance and trust is

more important than a counselor's specific techniques. The client must believe that she can express without condemnation. To create this climate, counselors use their primary helping tool—their own personality" (27).

To comprehend meaning in a student's writing, we must become active and intense listeners, focusing beyond that student's words or actions to the "meanings or perceptions that are producing that behavior" (Taylor 30). This type of listening is actually therapeutic for the talker: she is conscious of our effort, and in the talking can begin to understand herself. Assured that the tutor does not intend to demean or judge her, the student will not remain "a passive receptacle." She will feel willing to "commit to writing without fear of being wrong" (27). Taylor cites three traits that help establish trust and acceptance in the writing conference: helper empathy, warmth and caring, and regard and respect.

Tom MacLennan, an advocate of the Buberian philosophical approach in collaborative learning, echoes Martin Buber's I-Thou concept. In interpersonal exchanges, the recognition of the other person as a "Thou" rather than an "It" establishes a relationship of "openness, directness, mutuality and presence" (122). Buber's "true teacher is not the one who pours information into the student's head as through a funnel. . . . It is the one who fosters genuine mutual contact and mutual trust, who experiences the other side of the relationship" (Buber xix). Toward this mutual relationship, the tutor must take the first step. Rather than command, the consultant should invite dialogue, for according to MacLennan and Buber, genuine dialogue is by definition invited, never commanded.

True dialogue that leads to learning involves identification with other people and thus, attunement. James Moffett believes that attunement begins when boundaries dissolve and defenses lower.

"Plenty of warm human relations, of diverse nonverbal experience, of opportunities to connect all around . . . will set the stage for learning by attuning" (126). Psychoanalyst Theodore Reik describes conversation that invites response and connection and leads to attunement: "In a conversation people speak alternately. When a person has said or reported something, the listener makes a remark, asks a question, gives a vocal expression of interest, or tells a story himself" (Reik 122).

In my experience as a Writing Place consultant at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, I have observed the success of Reik's alternating speaker-listener interaction. With little experience, I have consciously and successfully applied this as an invitation to dialogue and trust. Humor and shared experiences brought up at the appropriate time will win student response and trust. First I talk, then I listen. According to Reik, the freely talking client will invariably tell us what is wrong. I listen with Reik's "third ear" for repetitions, tones, gestures, allusions, evasions. Even while moving to the consulting room, I mentally take note of student posture, gesture, her choice of consulting cubicle and chair. We talk while completing the required consulting data sheet. When the student's paper finally appears on the table, somehow her paper seems less central to the meeting than does the student herself.

From the initial meeting and throughout the consultation, I make an effort to build empathy by looking for mutual interests and acquaintances. Students from our local area sometimes have had the same secondary school teachers I had in the 1960s. I often laugh along with them at my having had a crush on one now elderly, eccentric biology teacher when he was young, good-looking, and new to his profession. With a creative writer's penchant for making connections, I look for connections between the student's chosen subject and my own interests,

knowledge, and experience. Before and after reading her paper, I will comment about some of these connections, then pause so that the student may respond. She invariably does. This technique has worked equally well with the student unable to start a paper as with one experiencing an impasse or writer's block.

A favorite technique is to surprise students by finding special abilities previously unrecognized in their writing, or by showing them how to turn weaknesses into positive writing strengths. One student who comes immediately to mind overused negative criticism to the extent that her writing tended to depress her readers. One day I praised her remarkable gift of cynicism as well as her natural sense of humor in conversation. Combining the two "gifts" should produce some impressive satire, I told her. Surprised because former teachers had discouraged her consistently negative approach, she nevertheless tried this combination, and it worked.

Raised in a conservative Southern environment, I have at times wrestled to keep an open mind when students have expressed liberal or radical opinions about contemporary issues. When a student appears to struggle while arguing an issue, I have learned to look for signs of conflicting or repressed feelings. Too often, as in my own life, the student has been discouraged at home and in school against arguing her viewpoint. Several students who have learned to trust me sufficiently to express unorthodox opinions have produced persuasive papers that have altered my own earlier notions.

An example of this involved John, a student from an ultra-conservative family and environment. His persuasive essay defended the subject of his choice—Reggae music. After three dry and listless drafts and much frustrating discourse, I suspected, then realized, that John actually wanted to promote the Rastafarian movement itself. After considering several of my questions toward

that end, John agreed that this was precisely what he wanted to do. My encouragement rather than the feared disapproval seemed to give him license to write his mind. And in the next draft, he quite successfully did just that. Although I sometimes still inwardly disagree with their arguments, my attempts at the open and nonjudgmental approach have helped relax my students and reap for me the benefit of a deeper understanding of my life and of the people around me. My trust of them returns trust to me, the truster becomes trusted, and teacher becomes taught.

Mary Catherine Bateson explores and presents this learning of trust or distrust as the most fundamental learning that shapes society (41). Development of personhood comes from the ability to achieve closeness, from caring and commitment that lead toward community (62). Each of us needs interactions that require not confessions of ignorance, but "mutual accommodation without either participant surrendering" (156). We don't want to say to our student clients, as sometimes our schools have said, "Leave your self, your self-esteem, the confidence accrued from learning to walk and speak, at the door" (67).

In a society which ostensibly values individuality, educators too often succeed in silencing individual expression and putting confidence at risk (Bateson 67). At UNC-Wilmington, our Writing Place Director and staff have dedicated themselves to creating a place for students to experience that trust so necessary to the expression and growth of individuality. We build friendships in our sharing of energy and because of what we are together.

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## Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

- October 4-5: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Paul, MN  
Contact: Ginger Young, Central Missouri State University, Humphreys 120, 320 Goodrich Drive, Warrensburg, MO 64093
- Oct. 24-26: Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association, in Albuquerque, NM  
Contact: Anne Mullin, Writing Lab, Campus Box 8010, Idaho State University, Pocatello, ID 83209 (208-236-3662).
- April 18-20: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Augusta, GA  
Contact: Karin Sisk, Augusta College, Writing Center, Dept. of Languages, Literature, and Communications, Augusta, Georgia 30904-2200. Fax: 706-737-1773; phone: 706-737-1402 or 737-1500; e-mail: ksisk@ac.edu.

## New WCenter address

To subscribe to WCenter, the electronic discussion group for writing center specialists, send to their new address:

send to: listproc@listserv.ttu.edu  
(no subject line)  
message: subscribe wcenter <your name>

If you have any questions, contact Lady Falls Brown: ykflb@ttacs1.ttu.edu

# WRITING CENTER ETHICS

## Kiping

The night before the publishers' display area actually opened at the 1996 Conference on College Composition and Communication, several of us happened to be standing around booth for the NWCA Press (the National Writing Centers Association's new press), doing our best to look official and hoping no one took the time to examine our conference badges too carefully. The security crew at the convention center seemed overwhelmed and understaffed, so I suspect they were more than happy just to ignore us as long as we didn't cause any trouble.

We milled about a bit, checking out the booth space, and we also spent some time kicking ourselves soundly for not ordering a taller chair for MaryJo Turley to sit in. (Mary Jo, the assistant to the editor for the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, had gallantly offered to tend the booth during the conference.) The table we'd ordered was too high for her to use with a "normal" chair, and that meant she would probably have to spend much of the conference on her feet or getting up and down repeatedly. We lamented that her back and foot arches would get pretty sore without a chair more suited for our display table.

Then one of our group noticed that booth next to ours—the booth conspicuously lacking an attendant—had just the sort of chair we had been wishing for.

"Do you think anyone would notice," one of us mused, "if we took that chair and traded it for the one in our booth?"

A couple of us glanced at each other and raised our eyebrows in Spocklike fashion.

"Well, I think they might be able to figure it out when they sit down and find their cash register is at eye level," I said.

"Aw, c'mon, you guys," our smiling comrade continued, cycling the chair hungrily. "Let's grab the chair. This is the sort of stuff that writing center people have to do all the time to get by. Haven't you had to scrounge up furniture like this for your own center?"

Indeed, as Spock would say.

Indeed.

It's interesting how little threads in one's life come together sometimes. A few days ago, I was reading a column about the term "kiping" (pronounced KY-ping) and the ways that kids in the late sixties used the term to rationalize stealing. The columnist—in his urge to condemn the practice—never bothered to describe any of the differences between "kiping" and "stealing" as kids saw it, probably because his whole argument lay in the fact that he didn't want to make a distinction.

But the rest of us kids knew there was a difference. "Kiping" was when you took small stuff from a business or a store or a vendor's stand. "Stealing" was when you took something valuable from another person. Stealing was personal. Kiping was faceless. Stealing could really hurt somebody. Kiping just took a tiny bite out of a big company.

As kids, we thought kiping was inconsequential. It didn't make a difference. Stores had LOTS of stuff lying around, and they usually never even missed what

was kiped. Besides, we knew stores figured kiping losses into the prices they charged, so it didn't seem to us that kiping really hurt anybody—except maybe the insurance companies and nobody really liked them much anyway.

As you've probably figured out by now, I was one of those kids who kiped stuff every once in a while. Mostly I kiped balloons or pieces of candy from big bins at kid-level in grocery stores, and I think I may have even stuffed a comic book or two up my shirt from time to time. I never took anything really big, but even a small kipe was exciting to my little eight-year-old mind, and a successful kipe gave a quick rush of adrenaline, a secret glow of illicit accomplishment, a subtle yet lingering sense of guilt and shame, and a flurry of rationalizations for how what I did was "not bad at all and, in fact, perfectly justified under the circumstances."

For me, kiping was the perfect embodiment of a *guilty pleasure*. I felt pleased with what I had managed to acquire through kiping, and I felt a little guilty about what I had done, but damn it—I needed that stuff, and it was just sitting there!

Which brings me, once again, to writing centers and an ethical concern I haven't had to deal with since my kiping days in junior high school.

My smiling colleague at the CCCC was right about one thing: the rest of us had all, at one time or another, brought scavenged equipment or supplies or furniture into the writing center for our own use. (And it doesn't matter who the

"smiling colleague" was. It could have been any of us, and besides, I want to continue publishing my column in *WLN*, so I think I'll keep her identity a secret.)

Writing centers are notoriously underfunded by many, many institutions, and sometimes scrabbling under desks and in the back of storage cabinets for wayward pens and pencils and paper clips and rubber bands is the only way to keep things running for most of the year. There are minimal tutor budgets, minimal supply budgets, and minimal operations and maintenance budgets. Small wonder that writing centers find themselves forced by circumstance to construct comfortable, productive working environments from the discards of better-funded departments and campus buildings.

I think we should be proud of that accomplishment and unashamed of our occasional need to seek recourse in the "underground economy" of most educational institutions. Necessity is a mother, as the saying goes, and desperate times call for desperate measures—as, uh, another saying goes.

And before any more clichés and trite phrases come to mind, then, (and with my tongue placed firmly in my cheek), I offer the following list of guidelines, advice, and sage wisdom to assist my writing center colleagues in their quest to create and maintain the best possible writing centers they can in the face of difficult financial prospects next year. I think we have all adopted at least some of these rules as circumstances warranted, and I just want you all to know that I absolve you of any guilt you may feel should you choose to adopt any of them again. Have a good summer and enjoy a well-deserved rest!

### The (Half-Serious) Rules of Ethical Writing Center Kipping

#### Rule #1: The Law of Free-Floating Hallway Furniture

*Any piece of furniture or office equipment that remains in a*

*hallway for more than 48 hours by rights belongs to the first person to claim it.*

*Corollary: If a piece of furniture, or office equipment remains in a hallway for more than a week, then someone will be grateful if you take it away.*

#### Rule #2: The Law of Trash by Association

*Any office supplies or materials that are stacked near to a garbage can are probably going to be thrown out and can be taken by anyone who wants them. It is unimportant whether these materials are still in their original packaging.*

#### Rule #3: The Law of Interchangeable Computer Accessories

*When a computer mouse or keyboard or some other piece of detachable hardware in the writing center becomes damaged or inoperative, it can easily be exchanged for a similar piece of equipment at another computer station—preferably one that is available for general student use elsewhere on campus.*

#### Rule #4: The Law of Unrecorded Borrowing

*If nobody makes a note of your having borrowed something for use in the writing center—supplies, chairs from a nearby classroom, an overhead projector, etc.—then you can keep it as long as you want.*

*Corollary #1: If nobody asks you about your borrowed stuff for a week, then you can claim that the stuff has always been yours.*

*Corollary #2: If someone wants to borrow something from the writing center, make a note of it and threaten bodily harm should it not be returned soon.*

#### Rule #5: The Law of the Missing Witness

*If nobody saw you do it, then it must have been somebody else.*

Michael A. Pemberton  
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

(Notes from the anonymous "smiling comrade" mentioned above: Some additional rules to consider adding to the above list: 1) After you've worked with an athlete or any other strong, fit-looking student in a tutorial, ask if he/she is generally available after-hours to "liberate" furniture from down the hall. 2) Never kipe or steal anything from a writing center friend. Related note: The advice about having an "athlete-on-call" is from a writing center colleague, offered long ago at an East Central Writing Centers Association conference. I'm not kipping, stealing, or plagiarizing that advice—just can't remember who offered it.

Additional note, for those of you who don't subscribe to any of the above rules: Michael Pemberton, who is also the National Writing Centers Association treasurer, decided that the chair-switching described above was stealing—not kipping, promptly returned the chairs to their original order, and paid the rental company for a taller chair for the NWCA booth.)

### A Reader Asks...

Do you know of medical schools that have writing centers? The Medical University of South Carolina has one; it was cited for commendation (the only component of the school so honored) during its last accreditation. But I am trying to do some research on writing in the medical profession, and I do not know of any more.

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## How-to handbooks

(cont. from p. 10)

Behind Brent's tough facade, I noticed his lack of confidence and reassured the discouraged student that difficult, tedious writing is normal and expected. Patiently guiding him through the components of his assignment, I helped Brent determine where his work was lacking, and together we explored ways to organize his essay, integrate materials learned in class, and, in Brent's words, "appease the professor."

Having learned that the best way to help a writer succeed is not to provide all the answers, I let Brent discover avenues for improvement independently. All I had to do was nod my head, and Brent had all the positive reinforcement he needed. Much nicer now, the mellowed cowboy seemed eager to get to work and left our conference actually smiling!

Several conferences later, I encountered a terrified re-entry student named

Karen. I remembered her paper as an awkward, disorganized transcription of notes, and I was interested to meet the person who'd written such a scattered piece. Willing to follow Karen's agenda rather than my own, I listened to a discouraged woman older than my mother describe her intense fear of writing, her resulting loss of confidence, and the seemingly hopeless desire she had to succeed as a re-entry student in an unfamiliar, intimidating environment. As we talked, my previous mental note popped up once again: though a tutor's role can be somewhat accurately described in how-to handbooks, true effectiveness depends on an ability to respond to each student's unique needs! Though a little coaching was enough for Brent, Karen needed a real cheerleader, and I tried to build her confidence by offering suggestions which would encourage rather than overwhelm. I told Karen, "You can do it," and paragraph by paragraph, we

evaluated both the strengths and weaknesses of the paper until Karen developed a realistic game plan to improve her work. Soon, Karen's downcast "I can't" became a more optimistic "Maybe I can try this . . .," and I watched her regain a belief in herself and a desire to try again.

Now a more seasoned tutor, I look back on my first few conferences with satisfaction. Reading the first drafts taught me to dismiss judgment; meeting their authors helped familiarize me with varied personalities and individual needs; and hearing Karen say, "Next paper, I'm coming back to you again!" gave me not only a nice pat on the back, but also an enthusiastic desire to plunge into my next stack of rough-edged drafts.

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# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

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