THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Volume 20, Number 2 | Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing | October, 1995

...FROM THE EDITOR...

Are writing centers confined to the margins, unhappily relegated to the edges of academia as unappreciated outcasts? Or—for our own health and integrity—should we fight to remain "writing borderlands"? Or is moving outside the institution (literally) the way to learn more about ourselves? In this issue of the newsletter, Kevin Davis looks at his history to explain why he wants his writing center to remain subversive, outside the boundaries, "an academic fringe dweller." Marjorie Keil and Debra Johanyak offer us their account of moving outside of their institution in order to learn about their center and its practices. We learn from our stories.

We also learn from our tutors, and Tim Giger, a peer tutor, offers his insights on fresh methods for effective prewriting. Since tutors are readers of the newsletter too, we've had some requests for group rates for tutors who would like their own subscriptions. So far, we haven't been able to establish a group rate, but we're working on it. If there is sufficient demand, we'll keep trying. Let us know if you have five or more people at one address who would like their own issues and are interested in having us pursue this.

•Muriel Harris, editor

...INSIDE...

The writing center: An idea beyond containment

A glance at the *Writing Lab Newsletter* or WCenter, the electronic discussion group, confirms that most of our collective frustrations pit the writing center against the institution that contains it. Budgets limited by bottom-line priorities result in a shortage of physical space, equipment, and personnel—problems further complicated by hierarchical structures that stifle collegiality and restrict our influence on campus. Writing centers are indeed "contained." To borrow from the thesaurus, perhaps as a consequence of being "housed," "enclosed," "accommodated," and "involved" by those institutions, we are "suppressed," "repressed," "restrained," "curbed," and "checked." In his keynote address at the 1994 East Central Writing Centers Association conference, Lester Faigley suggested that writing centers of the future might reside outside current confines—a possibility giving rise to the question of what happens when we reach beyond our institutional space. In other words, if we vacate our "accommodations," will we cast off our "restraints"?

Offering an autobiography workshop on-site at a local senior adult residence

afforded us an opportunity to explore this question. When we received a faculty development grant for community service, our primary outreach efforts at the writing center of The University of Akron— Wayne College had consisted of staffing the grammar hotline and hosting an annual student/community poetry jam. In both these activities, the writing center functioned explicitly as an extension of the larger institution. Venturing out into the community enabled us to look at the writing center as a separate, though not entirely independent, entity.

The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, published in ten monthly issues from September to June by the Department of English, Purdue University, is a publication of the National Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement. ISSN 1040-3779.

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Subscriptions: The newsletter has no billing procedures. Yearly payments of $15 (U.S. $20 in Canada) are requested, and checks must be received four weeks prior to the month of expiration to ensure that subscribers do not miss an issue. Please make checks payable to Purdue University and send to the editor. Prepayment is requested from business offices.The URL for the newsletter's World Wide Web page is: http://owl.trc.purdue.edu/Files/newsletter.html

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.

The satellite setting of the autobiography project and its population, widely divergent from our campus students, enabled us to draw distinctions between the institutional writing center and the underlying theories and attitudes that guide our practice.

Initial contact with the senior adult community's activities director yielded twelve residents interested in writing their life stories. Over the course of the five-week project, however, several men and two legally-blind women decided it did not suit their needs, although we offered to accommodate them with audio taping, etc. The twelve writers who began the project and the seven who have completed it are a force to be reckoned with: their vitality, both physical and mental, their years of lived experience, and their compelling stories and gifts for storytelling compounded our respect for them as individuals. They found it difficult to believe we considered them writers simply by virtue of their having joined the group. We considered ourselves experienced writers who had helped other, less experienced writers—anything but authority figures. Referring to us as "the college girls," group members perceived us initially as teachers, not facilitators, and definitely not peers. From their perspective, girls or not, we represented the college; therefore, confident that we possessed the wherewithal to "make" writers of them, they invested us with the authority to "correct" their writing.

Despite their writing apprehension, working with this group was comparable to writing center sessions with our most enthusiastic, best-prepared students. All of the participants, lifelong rural residents who had come of age at a time when many women left high school to work or marry, were high school graduates. Maxine had earned her bachelor's degree in education in 1931; Dorothy had taken a journalism course but exchanged career plans for taking care of elderly parents and reviving a failing historic site. Lois carried on a lively correspondence with numerous relatives and friends. Hilda and Marcy were well-traveled, and Marie had spent two years in the 1950s living in India. And yet they needed the assurance that we—representing an institution of higher learning as we did—would "correct the grammar" in whatever they wrote. No longer restricted by those ethical considerations about "fixing" student papers—rooted in both institutional and writing center philosophy—we agreed to act as editors and proofreaders, thereby enabling each writer to go about capturing in writing her approximately 80 years of experience. Balancing student expectations and demands with writing center ethics is a universal concern so we won't equivocate: it felt absolutely wicked and completely glorious to comply with their request.

Separated physically from the institution, we felt free of the tension between teacher expectations, student demands, and writing center philosophy, and the fix-it ban wasn't the only rule we violated. While fully aware that the very act of composing one's autobiography provides an opportunity for life review and putting experience into perspective, we admit to having approached the project with a shameless product orientation. Since the median age of our participants was 80, our goal was neither to improve the writer nor the writing, nor to help the writer discover new things about her composing process. Our self-proclaimed mission was to assist each participant in composing her life story in her own voice so that she and her family would have a tangible record of her experiences, reflections, and thoughts—a typeset and bound text—a product.

To assist them in achieving their goal and ours, questions played a central role in our sessions as they do in typical writing center conferences. To help the writers sort through and organize a lifetime of experiences, we divided the life span into five segments, which corresponded with our five workshop meetings—early childhood, later childhood/adolescence, early adulthood, the middle years, and the senior years—and we provided writ-

ing prompts and questions. The questions, the writers told us, enabled them to begin what had seemed an overwhelming task of recording their life stories. Several of the writers had made frustrating false starts before joining the group. Too much material and too few strategies had led to writer's block, for which our questions became the answer.

To help dispel their notion of our student-teacher relationship, we attempted to demystify writing by focusing on audience, purpose, and the image of themselves they wished to present to their families. Using the preface to Franklin's autobiography as a model, we reiterated that the autobiographical writer *chooses* his or her material and creates a persona; in other words, autobiography is far from the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We introduced them to the concept of their own power as writers to shape another's reality: the incidents they chose to relate, their tone in relating them, and their portrayals of their roles in those incidents that would construct the image of themselves their children would come to know. As a confidence-builder, this was an effective strategy. Unfortunately, the presentational mode, along with our word-processed-and-copied writing prompts, also foregrounded our institutional connection and continued to separate us from them. It was not until we became part of a generalized audience that the situation would change.

In the college writing center, at times the elusive concept of audience is made manifest by the tutor's feedback. With the autobiography writers, audience was far more than a concept. Most were motivated to write by their adult children's interest in family history, legend, and lore; audiences were tangible and contextualized readers. When urging writers to develop ideas with specific details and explanations, we simply asked what questions their children or grandchildren might have about the topic, or what they might need or want to know. Lois, a mischievous child AND adult, was acutely aware of a more expansive audience, including siblings, friends, and church members, and in some respects was constrained in her storytelling by the need to censor for all those constituencies. Subsequent to publication, the writers all complied with requests from the college library, public library, and county historical society for their life stories; each one had acquired a larger readership, which included all the members of our group, but her audience—authentic and specific—remained the same.

Because the highlight of our sessions was having each writer read excerpts from her "homework" (and we wondered why they persisted in casting us as authority figures!), reader response feedback developed naturally and became organic to the sessions. Questions and comments from the group guided further development of any episode; readings also jogged the memories of others and helped them, in turn, add to their stories. During the third week, which focused on young adulthood, the writers finally began to view us more as peers than as teachers. While they had begun by calling our workshops a class, at this time they also shifted their designation to writer's club. We believe that the nature of the topics—career choices, leaving home, choosing life partners, parenthood—encouraged mutual exchanges of personal information that superseded institutional authority. In the course of conversation, the writers learned that the "college girls" were actually middle-aged and mothers of adult children. Participants began asking us where we lived and where we had come from—other than Wayne College. We, on the other hand, were engaged by their everyday experiences— courtship, mothering, domestic life—and became part of the audience rather than producer/directors of the product. Outhouse stories always guaranteed a laugh, and we added "thunder mug" to our vocabularies—that's chamber pot to the uninitiated. Lois read of shopping for wedding clothes with her intended, Gordon, and added, "Who says you shouldn't see the clothes before the wedding? We have had many happy years together, 64 in 1993." Hilda reported on her first job; in 1939, she earned 18 cents an hour sewing leather jacket parts at a clothing factory. When we all sat around the table, tearful over Marie's loving description of taking home her adopted son, our communal relationship was sealed and we finally shed the mantle of authority.

Since there were only seven writers by the third workshop, working one-to-one on request became routine. We also made house calls when participants produced a completed rough draft—reviewing, offering feedback, and honoring their requests for help in imposing order on isolated, unrelated events or reflections. These were opportunities to give each writer our undivided attention and to look over photographs to be included in her book; to admire a recent craft project, and in several cases, to meet family members. We felt we knew them intimately: after all, we had assisted at the birth of their life stories.

The accumulated benefits of this outreach project have far surpassed our expectations. Because the writers are lifelong residents of the community in which the college is located, they offer a unique historical perspective on the area, which resulted in the interest of the college and public libraries and county historical society. The local press, by covering the project and subsequent events, provided excellent publicity for the college—and high visibility for the writing center. The publication of their autobiographies enhanced the esteem of the writers among themselves, their families, and the community. In terms of Erikson's developmental tasks, the challenge of the elderly— integrity versus despair—involves finding meaning in one's life and looking back with a sense of satisfaction (Erikson 140). In evaluating the project, Hilda noted that in writing her life story, she had "taken on a very difficult task, but a very worthwhile one." Maxine had so much to add after her initial conclusion that she composed an epilogue. It begins:

> This is being written after I reread the main part of my life story. In

retrospect I think I always was wishing for things I didn't have or couldn't do. "I wish I could. . . ." "Why did I do that?" "I might fit in better if only I could. . . ." and so on and on. Life really was good to me. I recall the last lines of a poem I had in Victorian poetry in college. I can't recall the name of the poet or poem, but the last line is something like "It was the last of life for which the first was made."

We, too, learned a great deal about writers, writing, and writing centers. Taking the writing center out of the institution, however temporarily, confirmed that authority imposed by clients on writing center personnel stems from institutional associations rather than from the attitude, appearance, or aura of an individual tutor. Whether an eighteen-year-old peer tutor or a middle-aged member of the part-time faculty, a tutor is cast in the role of authority figure by virtue of having been hired or selected by the larger educational institution and in turn becoming its tacit representative. At the outset, those using the services of a writing center want, and probably need, to believe that tutors are more knowledgeable than clients are. And indeed they are, if not by writing experience and formal education, then by their knowledge of tutoring strategies. Tension ensues when clients equate tutor knowledge with authority— authority to direct and control writing, to dispense correctness. Off campus, we were able to accept editorial authority because we were not participating—directly or indirectly—in the education of students as we do on campus, and, therefore, were not bound by the same ethical considerations. "Fixing" a student's paper is one thing; empowering a senior adult to find pleasure in constructing a personal narrative is quite another. On the other hand, unwanted authority, conferred on us by the writers and inherent in some of the strategies we used, appeared to be more of an obstacle to us than it was to them; it temporarily hampered the ideal atmosphere we were trying to create—the collaborative, socially-constructed Burkean Parlor that Andrea Lunsford describes (8).

Moreover, we learned that by working with student writers every day, we had come to overlook the indomitable spirit of the process approach to writing. Through our new vision, we recognize that although we went into the project product-driven, the process prevailed. Brainstorming, rough drafts, peer response, and revision were evident throughout the program. Although the final product was their focus and a major source of satisfaction to the writers, the social contact, mental stimulation, and self-discovery they experienced were direct results of the process. It was our means to an end, yet in several senses, an end in itself.

It goes without saying that this project has been one of our most worthwhile pursuits. The benefits, professional and personal, have far outweighed the time and effort it required, but we do need to address some practical considerations. Let's begin with economics. In this respect, above any other, the writing center is bound to the larger institution. Many centers simply could not afford to offer a similar outreach activity; it was time-consuming and costly. And although Wayne College funded our project through a faculty development grant, it was a modest sum since we grossly underestimated the amount of personal time the program would demand. On an hourly basis, minimum wage looks generous in comparison. In the future, we'll be guided by Murphy's Law and realize that everything takes twice as long as we think it will.

In addition to grant funding, our institution also provided support through the services of the word processing department. Beginning with the handwritten manuscripts, technicians entered the narratives on word processing equipment, typeset them using desktop publishing, scanned in photographs, then duplicated and bound the finished products. Should we plan a similar project, we'll include funding for a student assistant to handle the word processing functions. Above all, we learned that it is possible to take the writing center outside its institutional confines but practically impossible to take the institution out of the writing center. Temporarily leaving our "accommodations" did free us from certain "restraints," but even moving the writing center beyond its physical boundaries could not prevent the institutional baggage from coming along for the ride. In light of the senior adult autobiography project, however, a final glance at the thesaurus reminds us that yet another synonym for "contain" is "embrace," and that being able to accomplish our writing center work—wherever it takes place— requires trade-offs.

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Southeastern Writing Center Association and South Carolina Writing Center Association

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

Deadline for proposals: October 15. Proposals may be sent by e-mail. For information, contact Phillip Gardner, Writing Center, Francis Marion University, Florence, SC 29501 (pgardner@ACS2.fmarion.edu)

Life outside the boundary: History and direction in the writing center

Several recent authors have sought to connect personal histories with the teaching of writing (see, for example, Bishop, Cutuly, or Rose). Others have sought to suggest new directions for the next generation of writing centers (see, for example, Clark, DeCiccio, or George and Grimm). Oddly, the two concepts—personal history (who we are; how we got here) and writing center direction (where we're headed individually and as a profession)—have not been linked. To begin filling the void between personal history and center direction, I merely want to share some stories about who I am and why I've become the person I am; and I want to explore some meanings those stories suggest for the direction of my writing center in particular and of writing centers in general. I'll begin with three writing center vignettes.

1. Last year, I found myself fighting with Dr. God, the English department's senior member, one of those teachers whose word is unquestionable. Dr. God attempts to incorporate some new teaching ideas into his classrooms, but somehow they always disintegrate in his hands. Last spring, he experimented with allowing his composition students to turn in multiple drafts, but his comments on early drafts were incomplete, and he blasted graded drafts for indiscretions he had overlooked in earlier drafts. Further, students we helped on early drafts seemed to be getting lower scores on their papers (he was being tipped off by the session summaries we send professors), so I felt forced to intervene. Through the ensuing battle I learned that Dr. God allowed multiple drafting but rewarded first-draft-perfect writers. Two equal quality late drafts were graded differently: lower final grades went to students who visited the writing center before submitting first drafts and to students who had lower quality first drafts.

2. Earlier this year, two of my tutors, Alan and Marcie consulted me about students coming to the center from Dr. Whimsy in psychology. Whimsy is well-known around campus for his idiosyncrasies, and both tutors had already successfully negotiated his class. Knowing what they knew about Whimsy, the tutors understood that helping students only with writing would not help them with Whimsy's class. But if tutors supplied inside information because of their knowledge of Whimsy and his assignments, they took the center beyond helping people write, moving us to helping people overcome a professor's quirks. Alan and Marcie weren't sure how to proceed. Was this cheating? If not, what was it? Could we do it? With a clear conscience?

3. Three years ago, the Oklahoma Regents for Higher Education ordered all colleges to drop basic writing courses. This year, however, they have reconsidered, demanding that all schools have a specific plan for teaching basic writing; they leave program design to the individual schools. On our campus, the English department chair designed and recommended a plan which would adhere basic writing courses to writing center components, for the first time establishing a mandatory link between the two programs. I became immediately suspicious of the plan as making us too regular a part of the department and the institution, too traditional, too rigid.

These vignettes describe some dichotomies I'm coming to recognize as pervasive to writing center function. Regularly, we are forced to choose between allegiance to students or allegiance to faculty, between knowledge-centered education or teacher-centered education, and between a people-centered or an institution-centered role.

And I have come to realize that who I am describes how I respond to these choices, which in turn describes who I am and what the writing center is. My description of myself and of the writing center cycle simultaneously, intermingled. My decisions, then, are embedded within a series of personal and professional decisions extending forward and backward through time. Who am I, anyway? How did I get to be this person? How has this self-definition informed, and been informed by, my role in the writing center? And finally, what are the implications for the future, both personally and professionally? For answers, I began by looking backwards.

First, I rediscovered my insolent youth. As an MA student, I was too irreverent to be successful, exploring my own paths rather than those the professors dictated. My teaching went without recognition as I struggled between the prescribed curriculum and my own stretch-the-envelope beliefs. Obviously, I was never part of the academic mainstream.

Second, I rediscovered my idealism. I recall an early job interview when an academic dean asked me about the "proper distribution of grades in a composition course." Renegade and idealist, I responded that if I did my job and the students did theirs, an all-A class was possible. The memory convinced me that I had been fighting Dr. God long before I met him.

Third, I rediscovered my tendency to

manufacture answers. For example, when I began a second round of interviews at 30 with six years of business experience, I viewed every interview as a puzzle where I only needed to discover what my questioner wanted to hear. And so, when I was asked if I had ever worked in a tutoring center, I ducked the question. "I've always thought it would be interesting work," I said. "My students praised the writing lab, but I never had a chance to work in it." All lies. The school had started their lab the year after I graduated: I had no chance to work in it because it didn't exist; my students praised it only to other teachers.

This ancient history is interesting not for the details of my life but for the message it constructs. A insolent academic, idealistic administrator, and creative answerer, I learned that my personal truths would forever keep me outside the standard university. Like Mike Rose, I lived a life on the boundary. To successfully negotiate that boundary, I had two choices: accept the indoctrination I had spent my life avoiding, or find an academic role that nurtured my insolence, idealism, and creativity. I found that role in a writing center.

A lot has transpired since I first fabricated my way into a teaching/tutoring position, and I learned to love my life in the writing center where I find myself actually getting paid to subvert academic stuffiness. In a sense I am perfect for the writing center because I managed to stay in the academy while remaining on the outside of the boundary. Thus I am uniquely qualified for dealing with other boundary dwellers.

Second, I became an accepted academic. I maneuvered my way into two better jobs; I earned a non-traditional PhD; I published a few articles.

Third, my life in the center validated my insolent, idealistic, creative self. My clients learned more from writing center one-on-one than my students did from class, so I turned my classroom into a tutoring group. Client comments affirmed that ominous grades impeded learning, so I abandoned all but end-of-semester grades. Through my tutoring, I learned how to ask questions and to listen, which made me more compassionate. And I learned the value of flexibility. And repeatedly, I learned to sabotage the system from inside.

As the center validated my natural tendencies, those characteristic traits shaped my center. The stories I began with represent times when I made conscious decisions to recertify the center's location outside the boundaries of traditional education. In each case, we had the option of moving into the system—becoming an institutional support service—or of remaining outside—continuing to be a student support service. In each case, I looked back on my personal history and chose—carefully, purposefully—to keep the center firmly on the outside.

In a staff meeting, I discussed Dr. God with my staff, and they decided we should quit sending him session summaries if his students used the center prior to submitting drafts of their papers. As a result, he quit punishing students for using the writing center, student morale increased, grades improved, and even Dr. God was happy as his students quit complaining and started showing remarkable improvement. We chose insolence.

Marcie and Alan and I went to lunch to discuss Whimsy, and I reminded them about rhetorical triangles. Audience awareness, they decided, is part of writing, not something else. To withhold audience knowledge would be as indefensible as intentionally having clients mispunctuate sentences. Ideally, we wouldn't have to warn clients about Whimsy, but ideally Whimsy wouldn't be such an idiosyncratic odd ball. "I guess that it all comes down to whether we work for Dr. Whimsy or for the students. I know who pays me," Marcie finally declared, idealistically.

The basic writing question remains unresolved. But I have risen in objection, writing a center-based plan for accommodating basic writers. It would take basic writing out of the English department altogether, hire a full-time assistant writing center director, and establish an outcome-based, non-graded, non-credit program housed entirely in the writing center. The alternative plans cost about 60% of the original, so I remain optimistic that this creative plan will keep the writing center located outside the reach of the academic mainstream.

Such self assessment, I believe, is important. By describing my own life and my writing center's development, I establish a history upon which to build. Further, I suspect, many writing center people have similar personal and institutional histories, causing me to wonder "How can we know where we're headed if we cannot articulate where we've been? What does this history suggest for the future?" To that end, I close by offering a few maxims I am developing for my writing center.

1. *Be Insolent.* Any program which seeks to regularize the writing center's function is diametrically opposed to the very founding principles of the center. Our heritage, our lives place us on the fringe of the academy and to leave that fringe is to abandon who we are and what we do. This tenet questions referral forms, for-credit courses offered in the center, and any program which requires writing center attendance for the benefit of a more regular academic program. Our function, our existence, our clients require us to be irregular, non-academic, firmly astraddle the boundary dividing academic culture from the rest of America. If established authority systems of instruction were so wonderful, we wouldn't be here. To be swallowed by established authority negates our existence. We must remain insolent.

2. *Be Idealistic.* Our allegiance must always belong to the students we serve. While we may cooperate with teachers or administrators or assessment officers, we do not work for those people. We work for students. Subverting the system, using insider knowledge, perhaps even "cheating" are well within our domain; grading and

evaluating are not. This maxim questions the sending of session reports to faculty, and it challenges cooperation with programs, such as some assessment plans, where writing center personnel become evaluators rather than coaches.

3. *Be Creative.* We should get used to bad locations, inadequate resources, under-staffing. We are academic slum dwellers, and we must accept the physical aspects of living there. If you take us out of the ghetto, you take the ghetto out of us. After all, look at who has money on campus—business schools, law libraries—and ask if the writing center really wants to strive to be like them. We'll take a ratty couch, an old pencil, and a healthy dose of creativity to make the slum into a haven.

Being an academic fringe dweller, I easily found a home in the writing center. And being on the edge of the academy, the center easily encouraged my subversive nature. But we're a happy couple, living as we do just outside the boundary. And to be faithful to our legacies, the center and I must maintain our personalities as renegades, outsiders, boundary dwellers, subversives. Maybe, it now occurs to me, "writing center" is the ultimate misnomer; maybe we should be called the "writing outland."

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Call for Proposals

Centered Research: The Making of Knowledge in Writing Centers (working title) ed. Lady Falls Brown, Alice Gillam, Paula Gillespie, Byron Stay

Writing centers are uniquely situated to do research, and as our work begins to emerge as a discipline, the call for research has been overwhelming. How can we show that we are helping universities and colleges with retention? How can we evaluate and document our effectiveness? How can we learn about our own histories? How can we evaluate our training procedures? Is there something unique about research that is carried out in writing centers? What are our research traditions? How do we choose research methodologies? Into what theoretical and political frameworks must we fit our research? How has writing center research, its forms, definitions, and purposes, changed over time? What is the role and status of "lore" in writing center research and scholarship?

Submissions are sought for a new collection, *Centered Research: The Making of Knowledge in Writing Centers.* We welcome articles that do more than simply describe research. We want to consider how the researchers went about choosing their research methodologies, into what political and/or theoretical contexts they had to fit their research, and what ends their research had to serve. Possible categories to consider:

- ethnography
- theoretical frameworks (psychological, Marxist, feminist, etc.)
- close readings of trends in writing center research
- history of writing center research
- bibliographical work (archival studies)
- student-produced knowledge of writing centers
- reflections on writing center research
- relationships between writing center research and research in comp studies in general

Abstracts of up to 500 words must be received by January 15, 1996. Selected articles will be due May 30, 1996. Abstracts may be submitted electronically or send four hard copies to Paula Gillespie. Please include your name, affiliation, full mailing address, phone and fax numbers, and e-mail address with your abstract.

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Writing Lab make-over

Appearance matters.

Appearance matters, especially, in public areas associated with high stress activities. Dentists and doctors understand the potential of their offices' appearance to reduce patients' anxiety levels. Colors, furnishings, and pictures are chosen intentionally to calm nerves and lift spirits. For many of our students, the Writing Lab is in the same high stress category as the dentist's office. Recognizing that our lab's appearance affects attitudes, we've set out to find visual means to assure students of a warm welcome to a safe place. We have had to think CHEAP, relying more on originality than money. The resulting work-in-progress is an inviting room, enjoyed by faculty and students, and in demand for department meetings and gatherings. Perhaps other writing centers could use these inexpensive ideas for creating a comfortable environment.

Walls

Our opportunity to make changes came three years ago, when the lab appeared on the institute's list for periodic repainting. The room's shabby yellow walls, originally an attempt at sunny cheerfulness, had become dismally faded and smudged after years of heavy traffic. For a replacement, we picked a soft cream color from the painters' limited palette, knowing it would serve as a calming influence and provide a neutral background for our ambitious plans for a border.

Border

One problem contributing to the lab's foreboding, cavernous appearance was its fifteen foot high ceiling. In other offices and classrooms, we had had some success with a colorful border at about the eight foot level, where a normal ceiling would be. In this room, however, we were not satisfied with a strip of color. We wanted to SAY something; we wanted WORDS on the wall. Taking inspiration from a Gertrude Stein quote ("Writing is writing"), we thought about other synonyms for writing. Then we inserted our ideas into the original quote. The border which now wraps around three walls offers the following message: writing is COURAGE is writing is THINKING is writing is POWER is writing is DISCOVERY is writing . . . (you get the idea). The script lettering was outlined with a stencil, then filled in with a soft blue-green latex wall paint. The fourth wall, which faces the door, was a perfect site for the words WRITING LAB, in the same color and script as the border.

Marker Boards

Another eyesore was corkboards. Originally, the room had been built with two one-way viewing windows connecting the lab to the adjoining office. Evidently, no one was ever interested in one-way viewing, and the lab's mirrored side of the windows had been covered with cork squares. After many years of thumbtacks, the cork was crumbling and had, in fact, been declared a fire hazard. Two cans of adhesive remover and a week of messy scraping brought us back to the mirrors. Then a white marker board was installed within each opening, covering most of the mirrors, creating a bright clean wall, and doubling our writing space. In the strip of mirror left exposed above each marker board, we mounted pastel Georgia O'Keefe floral prints rescued from an old calendar.

Bulletin Boards

Two small bulletin boards were installed, one just inside the door and one in the hall. These boards have the lab schedule, instructors' schedules, lab guidelines, and photographs of all lab instructors.

Business Cards

Through the Institute, we have had business cards printed for the lab. These cards contain the lab hours, room number, and contact person, as well as the RIT logo. Cards are always available next to the sign-in book just inside the door.

Logo and Bookmarks

A cooperative artist brother-in-law designed an eye-catching department logo consisting of quill pen and inkwell. This design appears on department handouts, instructors' name tags, and promotional material. One version of lab bookmarks includes the logo and the lab hours and location. These bookmarks are always available in a pouch outside the door.

Kiosk

In the process of cleaning cupboards, we found stacks of old pamphlets on reading, writing, and study strategies. Not wanting to throw them away, we put them in a little cardboard stand, the kind used to distribute free newspapers, and placed it outside the lab door with a "Free—Take One" sign. Much to our surprise, students picked them up, read them, and tucked them into their book bags. The original supply of brochures is long gone, but we have found or created other "tip sheets" for the kiosk. There's nothing like freebies to attract potential customers to our door!

We are proud of our space and have been inspired to maintain and protect it. Old papers, cast-off furniture, and broken desks are not allowed to collect in the lab any more. Fresh flowers and potted plants brighten the tables and shelves. We're not finished yet. Our wish list includes updated tables and chairs, and we're on the look-out for a new computer table. For now, though, we are pleased to have surroundings that reflect our approach to teaching and to our students—professional, original, inviting, up-beat, and supportive.

Susan Donovan
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY

TUTORS' COLUMN

Zen and the art of prewriting

In the Writing Center, we teach the standard approach to process writing—prewriting, writing, revising, and postwriting. Every time I talk to a student about prewriting, I begin by getting out the same old proven argument. "You can't write a finished essay unless you write the first word. Prewriting is where you find that first word." It works, but I feel a little hypocritical each time I talk about it because it doesn't work for me, never really has. At least not in written form, that is. Most of the inventing process, for me, takes place as far away from my computer as I can possibly get. The method we teach students is to sit down with a piece of paper and a topic and write down everything they're thinking. Brainstorming, clustering, freewriting—most prewriting techniques are based on the principle of writing down active thoughts about your topic.

It's always been the *thinking* part that I've had to struggle with. The more I actively thought of a topic, the fewer the ideas that came to mind, almost as if I were censoring myself. So I set out to find a way to shut off the censor. I tried several forms of prewriting, but found myself, at the end of each effort, with a nearly blank page and a lot of frustration. It wasn't until an instructor collected our assignments *and* our prewriting that I realized where my censor was hiding. When the papers came back, the instructor had commented that I didn't need to use complete sentences in my prewriting; in fact, you're not supposed to use them! I didn't even notice that I was using sentence forms, but after reading her comments I began to realize what was happening. Somewhere in my brain was a formula that said "writing = sentences." Using that formula, my mind was editing my thoughts before they even reached my conscious mind so that what found its way to the page was grammatically good, but the bulk of my ideas were lost along the way. So, it looked like what needed to be done was to find a way to change the equation. Not as easy as it sounds, I'll tell you that much. I found it nearly impossible to break out of the formula. In fact, what I finally wound up doing wasn't so much a matter of changing the formula as it was finding a way around it.

Eastern religion, at least from a philosophical point of view, has always intrigued me, and there were already many activities to which I had applied elements of Taoism and Zen Buddhism. My first exposure to the East and their way of thinking was through an archery class I took when I was nine. In order to teach us the difference between "trying" which would cause each muscle to work independently to hit the target, thus making it harder to do, and "concentration" which let each muscle combine with the other, producing a smoother motion and truer aim, the instructor taught us not to focus on the goal (the bull's eye), but instead on the fluidity of the motions required to get there. He said that once everything about our technique worked as a whole, then the target would take care of itself. Learning not to try too hard is the essence of the Taoist principle of Wu Wei (effortless motion).

It seems so natural to me now that I'm surprised when I think of how long it took me to think of applying it to my writing. Basically, what it amounts to is not thinking about putting the words on paper, but instead concentrating on the ideas themselves, letting them flow freely in my head and merely "taking notes." When I first started using this method, I would go through the exercise with only a vague idea of my topic, letting it become clearer as the thoughts in my mind evolved into a consistent stream. Then I would write what I saw. Because I was thinking in pictures and scenes instead of words, my mental editor didn't have any sentences to form, so it packed up and went home. After using this technique, which I have come to think of as "visualizing," for a while, I learned that I could type as I went along if I didn't let my mind know what my hands were doing. That's easier than it sounds once I get caught up in a line of thought. Often times I've gone through the exercise and, when I was finished, looked up at the computer screen to find something only a few minor changes away from a final product.

Occasionally, I'll run across students in the Writing Center who are in the same position as I was. If conventional prewriting fails them consistently, we'll work through a visualization-style exercise where I'll ask them an occasional question to lead them and take notes while they answer, letting their minds wander from question to question. It almost always comes as a pleasant surprise to them when I show them a piece of paper full of their ideas, ideas their mental editors would have kept them from putting on paper otherwise. It always makes me feel good to see the newfound confidence on their faces as they walk out of the center, seeing writing for the first time as something other than the scary monster they thought it was when they came in.

Tim Giger
Peer Tutor
Johnson County Community College
Overland Park, KS

The Michigan Writing Centers Association

The Michigan Writing Centers Association (MWCA) was born on August 10, 1995. Formed to address the concerns of professional and tutorial staff in writing centers and writing support programs within Michigan, the MWCA is the culmination of a year-long effort.

In the fall of 1994, as the Michigan State University Writing Center was moving into its third year of operation, Jill Johnson, our writing center coordinator and former graduate student, expressed some frustration over the lack of communication with others in our state who also provide writing support to students. A few weeks later, armed with a list of Michigan colleges and universities, Jill and a graduate assistant began a phone survey. In record time they had assembled a directory of 67 writing centers and writing support services in Michigan, submitted a proposal for an all-day session on writing centers at the annual conference of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, and discovered possible grant funding for a summer institute.

Since the fall of 1994, representatives from nearly half of the 67 institutions have contacted us or joined us for a conference session or an organizational meeting and 14 representatives from 12 institutions across the state participated in the two-week long Michigan Writing Centers Project Summer Invitational Institute held at the MSU Writing Center in early June. Modeled on the National Writing Project, this institute provided participants with an opportunity to teach one another their own best writing center practices, to read and discuss current writing center theory and pedagogy (we chose *Intersections* and invited Joan Mullin, one of the book's editors, to join us for the last day of our discussion), and to design research projects to take back to their home campuses. We concluded the institute with a dinner and program at the University Club to which each participant was encouraged to invite an administrator from his/her home campus.

Throughout the year (and at the summer institute), we used every opportunity to discuss the possibility of forming a Michigan Writing Centers Association. On August 10, at a meeting held in the Western Michigan University Writing Center, we officially declared ourselves an organization and, with the help of Sharon Strand, who sent us a copy of the East Central Writing Centers Association constitution, began to draft our own constitution and by-laws. Currently, we plan to hold one Ideas Exchange a year (for both faculty and tutors/consultants) on different campuses around the state (first one will be October 7, at the University of Michigan, Flint campus), publish a quarterly newsletter, continue to encourage people to join our listserv, coordinate proposals for writing center sessions for several state conferences and use those conferences for convening our own special interest group, support one another's ongoing research projects, and seek funding to continue the summer institutes. Future plans include our own annual conference, an invitation to high school writing centers to join our association, and the development of a cadre of experienced writing center faculty and students available for consultation and on-site workshops.

In the summer institute, we not only increased our knowledge of writing center practices and enlarged our visions of research, but also learned to appreciate our diversity. Writing centers live in particular contexts and, thankfully, they usually evolve in ways that suit those contexts. One of the goals of our new association is not only to support and learn from one another but also to expand our appreciation for each other and the work we do.

Sharon Thomas
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI

Northern California Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals
March 1, 1996
Turlock, California
"New Directions in the Writing Center"

Changes in writing theory, technology and student population have posed new challenges for tutors and writing center coordinators. We invite interactive, hands-on demonstrations addressing these issues. Tutors are encouraged to present. Proposals are to be submitted on proposal forms. Send for proposal form, and address program inquiries to Ann Krabach, English Department, California State University, Stanislaus, 801 W. Monte Vista Avenue, Turlock, CA 95382. (209) 667-3247; e-mail annek@koko.csustan.edu Proposal deadline: January 6, 1996. Invitations will be sent January 20, 1996.

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Weirdoes, Wackos, and Writing Centers

It's time for the final column in my series on "The Top Ten Reasons Why Writing Centers are Unethical," and I want to thank all of you who've stayed with me over the last seven or eight months. I must admit I've really enjoyed writing the columns in this series because they gave me the opportunity to write about—and come to understand better myself—why I think the work we do is so important and why I think the service we provide to students, to faculty, to our institutions, and to writers of all sorts is entirely ethical, both in theory and in practice.

This month's column can be thought of as the culmination of the series, a column that provides, in certain respects, both pleasure and pain. It's a pleasure because I get to rely on some of the writing that other people have provided to me and because I think much of what they've written is pretty darned funny; it's a pain because the experiences our colleagues write about are, apparently, all too common in our day-to-day lives, working in and/or directing writing centers. The experiences I'm talking about, of course, are the weird responses, the odd requests, the bizarre attacks, the uninformed opinions, and the demented people we sometimes have to deal with as we try to do our jobs. As you may recall, my Reason #1 why writing centers are unethical was as follows.

> ***Reason #1:*** Writing centers are unethical because Hillary Rodham Clinton used to work in one, and if she was associated with them, then they must be horrible places.

As I said in my first column in this series, I have no idea whether our current first lady used to work in a writing center or not, but I suggested this "reason" was emblematic of some of the crazy and completely unpredictable reasons why some teachers (or students) might think writing centers were bad, unethical places. Now, I've had encounters with strange faculty and strange faculty perceptions of the writing center before, some of which I've related in previous columns, but I wanted to find out what other writing center people in other institutions have had to cope with over the years. I posted a request for "Crazy Stories" on the WCenter electronic discussion group, and in very short order I was rewarded (?) with a flurry of zaniness from writing centers across the continent.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of the infuriating wackiness was based in the continuing belief that writing centers are about grammar, the whole grammar, and nothing but the grammar, so help us Warriner's. James Werchan (Ohio State University, Lima) and Cathee Dennison (Virginia Tech) shared two experiences which I excerpt below:

> James: One of the principal folks involved in our FY class/tutorial combination has expressed his astute opinion (he's a Joycean) that intersubjective, touchy-feely pedagogies are hogwash, and quoted Paul DeMan in support of his opinion (yes, the Nazi-collaborator Paul DeMan). He (our guy) thinks grammar exercises are the ONLY suitable use for undergraduate tutors. He says at his alma mater, FY students were forbidden (!) to use the WC services, lest they pollute the purity of the professor's instruction.

Somehow, I can't help but be reminded of General Jack D. Ripper, the insane, grain-alcohol drinking military commander in the movie "Dr. Strangelove" for whom "purity of essence" was the driving philosophy of life. Just a thought.

> Cathee: I received a grammar hotline call from a faculty member asking about the correctness of attributing human characteristics to inanimate things, as in "Table One proves that..." (this is probably not a good example, but I don't remember exactly what he said). After consulting with our local grammar expert and former wc director, I told the prof that this manner of expression had come to be acceptable. He responded that this was NOT what he wanted to hear—in fact, he wanted me to back him up in his assertion that this was not acceptable. I pointed out that he was the teacher/advisor and could have his students do what he deemed appropriate (and require them to be supercorrect). Although I didn't actually come right out and tell him so, I felt that I couldn't say what he wanted to hear just because he wanted to hear it—let him use us as THE AUTHORITY when we didn't totally agree with him.

Carol Haviland (California State University, San Bernadino) offered up another interesting example of the odd viewpoints some people have about writing centers, an especially scary one if it managed to become widespread:

> One piece of advice I received when I took over the writing center here struck me as "wacko" material, even though I could understand why it might make sense to someone who viewed writing/composing/teaching differently (wackoly). I was advised not to record the instructors' names in cumulative statistics because this

would allow administrators and others to see whose students used the writing center frequently. The caution was that faculty members whose students were regular users would be thought to be poor teachers because they hadn't been able to do all the teaching themselves. This seems wacko to me, as I would be delighted by rather than fearful of reports that my students use the WC frequently. I'm still working on that faculty member's re-education.

Why do I get the feeling that re-education may be a vain hope in this case? Most faculty members we can manage to reach and teach, given enough time, enough goodwill among the parties involved, and—let's face it—enough common sense to go around. I don't know. . . maybe the underlying distrust of writing center practices and general paranoia I detect here is less problematic than I suspect. Maybe.

But the most bizarre (and frightening) story from WCenter participants was served up by a tutor named Jacqueline currently working at a writing center in a Canadian university. There's a kind of unreflective narcissism and paranoia demonstrated by the principal subject in this narrative, unendearing qualities under any circumstances but particularly horrific when they result in the kind of outburst described here. Jacqueline's narrative is a bit longer than the others I've quoted so far, but I think it's necessary to repeat the story in full, just to get the true flavor of what occurred.

> A writer came into the Centre and asked for help. She couldn't understand what it was her professor in her first-year English class was asking for in the out-of-class assignment. She'd read and read the assignment sheet, and asked her roommate to read it, and asked her don to read it, and no one could understand what it was all about, so she decided to come to the Writing Centre, because she heard that we helped people with their assignments.
>
> I said I'd do my best to help, and asked her if she'd brought the assignment sheet with her. She had, and she produced it, and I read it, and it had something to do with Hardy's *Tess of the Durbervilles,* and that was about all I could figure. So I gave her the standard line in such situations. I said, "Well, I could guess and we could go from there, but your best bet to get things like this straightened out is to go see your professor and talk it over with her; that way," I said, "you'll be sure you're on the right track."
>
> So off she went. The next day, during my shift of course, when the Coordinator wasn't around and I was there all by myself, of course, the faculty member came steaming in all red in the face and gesticulating, accusing either me or the Writing Centre in general of violating her academic freedom, and don't think she wasn't going to register an official grievance and take whatever action was available to her, and so on.
>
> Well, at first, I didn't even make a connection between this and the student I'd spoken to the day before. It took a mediator asking what this was all about to figure it out. It seems that, when the student went to her and asked for clarification of the assignment, and said that I, in the Writing Centre, had recommended that she do this, the faculty member felt as if someone were monitoring her teaching practices, and this, she felt, was an infringement of her academic freedom.
>
> In the end, the mediator recommended she not take any official action, saying that he thought it was all a misunderstanding, and that was the official end of it.

I think that anything I could say about this incident would be superfluous. You're all probably responding in the same way I am: with equal measures of amusement (which only comes from retrospect or a safe distance) and amazement. We sympathize, Jacqueline, but we're glad it didn't happen to us.

I suppose the incidents related here provide, if nothing else, continuing proof of the work that lies before us. Sometimes, in spite of our best efforts to face forward, pursue our pedagogical and theoretical goals, and remain focused on the opportunities in front of us, every once in a while someone or something sneaks up behind us and kicks us in the pants. Finding a reasonable and ethical way to respond to that kick may be one of our toughest challenges, but it may also prove to be one of our most rewarding and self-affirming experiences. We can only hope.

Michael A. Pemberton
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Assoc. of Graduate Students in English

2nd Annual Interdisciplinary Conference
Nov. 11, 1995
Northridge, CA
"Academic Discourse"

Topics will include the role(s) of Freshman Composition in the academy, discursive boundary zones between disciplines, the application of social theories to academic discourse communities, and competing definitions of academic discourse.Contact Scott Herring, English Department (mail drop 8248), California State University, Northridge, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, CA 91330

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

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 1: Northern California Writing Centers Association, in Turlock, CA
Contact: Ann Krabach, English Department, California State University, Stanislaus, 801 W. Monte Vista Avenue, Turlock, CA 95382. (209) 667-3247;

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

Assisting the graduate thesis writer through faculty and writing center collaboration

During the past two years, the University of Wyoming Writing Center has experienced a more than one hundred percent increase in number of conferences with graduate research writers. In specific terms, this meant nearly 250 such conferences during the 1992-1993 academic year. The increase was part of broader increases in conferences with both research writers in general and ESL research writers. Although we are not entirely sure why these changes occurred, they were apparently brought about, at least in part, by a new writing-across-the-curriculum program, which has resulted in (1) more writing and awareness of writing issues and problems in content-area courses and (2) a larger role and more visibility for the writing center. Increased graduate conferencing has not been an overnight development for us, however. Recent increases, though dramatic, are actually part of a trend that began about five years ago. In the process of understanding and adapting to these changes, we have gradually come to rethink our approach to working with research writers, especially graduate thesis and dissertation writers.

This rethinking has not been an entirely easy process. Initially, larger numbers of graduate thesis conferences appeared to mean larger numbers of two other types of problematic conferences, conferences with ESL writers and with writers requesting sentence-level editing. Our first reactions to the substantial increase in graduate thesis and dissertation conferencing were, in fact, less than positive for several reasons:

- Writers came to us with documents that were too long to discuss effectively in our usual thirty-minute conferences—and they often expected "quick fixes."
- Writers wanted us to edit for them, in the case of ESL writers especially, often word by word. We, of course, would not do so, but, more frequently than we liked, we found ourselves having to explain the wisdom of this policy to desperate graduate students. Moreover, we felt uneasy sending these writers away, perhaps because we suspected that their requests for editing masked other writing problems with which we should be able to help them.
- Sometimes graduate writers actually came to the writing center with messages or directions from their advisers, but messages that made little sense to us when we looked at their drafts. "A problem of language," one advisor wrote. "What does that mean?" we asked ourselves. "Articles and agreement problems," the ESL writer told us. Maybe diction, voice, or sentence structure," we thought. Transitions between paragraphs, we eventually learned when we spoke to the advisor. Occasionally, the written directives were even vaguer, for example, "This is wrong. See the writing center to fix it."
- Finally, more often than we liked to admit, we were unable to assist thesis and dissertation writers in substantive ways because we could not understand their material or their disciplines well enough to be sure we would help them locate "real" problems and would give them good advice or reinforce good solutions.

Initially, then, our responses to the increased requests for graduate thesis and dissertation conferencing were often discouragement and frustration. We keenly felt the need to discover a more work-

able approach to thesis and dissertation conferencing, one from which all of the parties involved could benefit.

Understanding Thesis Conferencing

Over time, our writing center staff has come to two important realizations about the difficulties we at first experienced with graduate thesis and dissertation conferencing. First, although graduate writers often appear to be asking us for inappropriate kinds of assistance with their writing, many of them *do* have problems that properly merit our assistance, problems typically masked by either the writers' unfamiliarity with the rhetoric of academic English or by our unfamiliarity with their specialized content and disciplinary conventions. Second, as the previous realization implies, we originally had problems in our own thinking and approach that made it difficult to provide efficient and substantive assistance to graduate writers.

Writer-based Difficulties

The problems graduate writers may bring to conferencing are related to campuswide misperceptions of graduate writing itself. As a result of these misperceptions, thesis and dissertation writers face some obstacles not generally recognized by the campus community, obstacles that may increase their difficulties in completing their tasks. Central to these difficulties is the fact that most advisers working with thesis and dissertation writers see them essentially as experienced or expert writers in their fields. After all, they are graduate students. They have taken many courses in their areas, possibly written many papers. Academia, in fact, tends to see the thesis or dissertation as the logical culmination of a process in which students have long been engaged.

In some ways at least, this is a misconception. When graduate students begin writing theses and dissertations, they typically *leave* a familiar writing environment—the classroom, where their instructors have assigned and evaluated writing tasks—and enter a new, professional community where they must begin to write as peers. Often, advisors and even the students themselves do not recognize this shift in discourse communities, though students may have great difficulty adapting to it. For them, producing typical academic coursework is likely to be more comfortable and natural than taking a place in a community of peers and finding a voice to express their membership in that community. Thus, although their departments, advisors, and the university may see them as *experienced* writers in their fields at this stage of their education, they are, to a lesser or greater extent, actually novice writers in this new context—and face some of the difficulties of novice writers.[1]

The difficulties thesis and dissertation writers face as a result of everyone's unawareness of the shift in which they are involved are further complicated by the substantial variation in expectations and models for research writing from discipline to discipline. That variation makes it difficult for writers to discover the guidance they need as they attempt to enter their new peer communities. In this sense, graduate writers may be literally cast adrift by the system, expected to know how to complete a task they have never faced before. This is particularly true for the increasing number of international graduate students requesting writing center conferences, who bring the complication of other cultural and rhetorical assumptions to an already challenging writing context.

Our first major realization about the difficulties we experienced in working with thesis and dissertation writers, then, was that we were often making the same misjudgment about their needs and skills that rest of the university community was making. We expected that, as graduate students about to complete degrees, they knew—or ought to know—how to do the writing required in their fields. Although we are seldom surprised to find freshman composition students, for example, requesting help with grammar or punctuation when what they really need is help with focus or structure, we did not expect that kind of response from graduate writers. As the number of requests for graduate conferencing increased, however, we began to suspect that this was often what we were seeing. It was, of course, harder to recognize and respond to this problem in graduate drafts because complexity of content and sophistication of task get in the way.

Writing Center-based Difficulties

The realization that there was "real" work to be done in thesis and dissertation conferencing highlighted for us a second major aspect of our problems in working with graduate writers, a writing center-based difficulty. We began to suspect that the model conference approach we had been using with great success with undergraduate writers in basic courses across the curriculum did not work well with research writers in the disciplines, particularly graduate thesis and dissertation writers. This approach, basically a one-on-one discovery process or dialogue based on writing process and writing to learn strategies, has two central problems in this context:

(1) it presumes a sort of generic, all-purpose rhetoric underlying academic writing, rather than the actual multiparadigm, multidiscipline community that exists in research writing; and

(2) it utilizes collaborative conferencing methods that depend upon one or both of the parties in the conference knowing the "answer" to the questions or solution to the problems of the writer—or at least recognizing a good answer or solution. In thesis and dissertation conferencing, however, it is quite possible that neither party in the conference knows the "answer." The initial summary of problems in graduate conferencing suggested the particular difficulty of writing center staff in this regard: working with unfamiliar material and conventions, often in

highly technical contexts, they are unlikely to be able either to frame questions that will help students "discover" solutions to their problems or, more important, to recognize "good" solutions when they appear and reinforce them.

What eventually became clear to us is that our typical conferencing strategies were unlikely to provide substantive help to graduate thesis and dissertation writers in the face of the multiple objectives and models for graduate research writing across campus and technical material of high density and sophistication. We also began to see, coincidentally, that, in a situation where neither party fully understands the expectations of the discipline, working on sentence-level issues may be the only kind of work possible. In essence, we had often ended up working with graduate thesis writers on problems of basic grammar and correctness by default, since even when we sensed larger problems, the content, conventions, and expectations of the writers' disciplines were too unfamiliar for us to tackle with assurance.

Developing a New Conferencing Model

As our staff came to understand the context and problems of graduate conferencing more fully, we began to create a new model for working with thesis and dissertation writers in the writing center. Our approach grew essentially from the realization that, to provide efficient and substantive assistance to graduate research writers, we needed to bring someone who actually knew the answers to their questions into active participation in the discussion of the drafts—i.e., the advisor, the experienced content-area writer. We acknowledged that, although we had always spoken of writing center collaboration as involving three persons—the writer, the writing center conferencer, and the instructor—we had, in reality, seldom made use of the content-area expert in conferencing. Any contact we had with the instructor or advisor typically occurred through the student, with direct discussion being the exception, rather than the rule.

We tried our new paradigm, for which we coined the term "trialogue" to distinguish it from the usual socratically based dialogue, experimentally for one year and have now adopted it as standard procedure. In practical terms, we establish the triangular collaboration by making an *initial* contact with the advisor a formal part of our work with thesis and dissertation writers *before* we begin any conferencing on drafts. Our first conference with these writers, then, essentially introduces them to our thesis conferencing process and provides us with the writer's impressions of the work we need to accomplish. After that first conference, we contact the thesis director and discuss his/her perception of where the student is in the writing process and what the director hopes will come out of our conferences with that student. We then set up a file to record the resulting objectives of the work and to trace its progress, continuing contact with the advisor, as needed, until the writer's problems are solved. Among the many benefits of the initial, informal discussion of the writing and conferencing processes are the opportunities it offers all three participants to clarify vocabulary and goals, acquire necessary information, and understand the expectation and limitations of the others involved in the collaboration.

The result is an active, three-way collaboration to which all participants bring a body of knowledge that must be included in the process of research writing. The advisor brings the expectations of the discipline or discourse community to the discussion; the writing center brings knowledge of the writing process and of the collaborative learning methods that will help the writer master some aspect of it; the writer brings the research topic, data, and relevant analysis, as reflected in the drafts. The writing context, then, is co-constructive. By communicating some of their knowledge to the others, all participants in the process come to understand what is needed for the student to produce a good piece of research writing in a particular context. The two kinds of writing instructors, one experienced in content-area writing and the other in writing process, work together to help the student writer acquire skills that either instructor would find more difficult to teach alone.

The goal of this triangular relationship is, obviously, to teach students how to actually write in their disciplines, not merely to ensure that they *finish* a piece of research writing. It responds to a real problem some faculty have expressed. Too often in the past, it appears, research faculty who had difficulty working with their graduate students' writing found themselves choosing one of two alternatives: (1) they let their students gather data and then did substantial parts of the writing or reworking of the writing themselves or (2) they sent the students to the writing center with instructions that turned out to be vague, hoping the writing center would be able to solve or help solve the problems the advisor could see. Often, this hope was futile since writing center staff, unfamiliar with technical content and disciplinary convention, ended up working by default on sentence-level cosmetics rather than the substantive issues the writers needed to confront. Under either option, students had difficulty learning how to do research writing themselves and joining the conversations of their disciplines. The collaboration involved in the trialogue model aims at bringing together all pieces of the research writing context so that students can actually understand and produce writing in their fields.

As part of this project, we have begun to measure the effectiveness of the trialogue approach in a more closely controlled environment. To that end, we are involved in an ongoing study applying the trialogue process to a graduate research group in computer science. The six-member group, five of whom are non-native speakers, are writing theses or dissertations in fault-tolerant computing. They provide us with the opportu-

nity to observe the effectiveness of our new paradigm in an orderly fashion with several students working in the same area with the same professor from the beginning of their thesis writing processes to the end. Close collaboration with the professor also allows us to collect fuller information on the writers and their backgrounds and get more insight into the advisor/graduate student relationship than we typically can. More complete results of this project will be forthcoming soon.

Conclusion

The realization that we needed to make contact with the advisor a regular part of work with graduate thesis writers seems a fairly simple one in retrospect. It did not seem quite as simple at the time since it diverged from our practice, our well-ingrained notions of model writing center conferencing (e.g., our sense that proper protocol meant never contacting an instructor unless a writer requested it). Regularizing contact with thesis advisors has been a key step in our ability to work with graduate writers, however.

Briefly, what our experiences to date with this project have shown us is that the problems graduate thesis and dissertation writers face are real ones and that they are relatively widespread on our campus. We have discovered that, more often than we might expect, thesis writers (and their directors) are frustrated by a writing context they do not entirely understand and where there are few, if any, formal courses to assist them. The trialogue process seems to us a first step toward a more efficient and effective method for providing substantive help to these writers.

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[1]Sometimes the problems exhibited by graduate writers who come to the writing center appear simply to be inadequate preparation for writing. A recent study of freshman law students at University of Chicago, however, persuasively supports the point that writers do not automatically carry writing skills from one level or community to the next, that expert writers in one context may be novice writers in another (Williams, Joseph M. and Gregory G. Colomb, "The University of Chicago." *Programs That Work.* Eds. Toby Fulwiler and Art Young. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990. 83-113.)

THE WRITING LAB
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