THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Volume 20, Number 3 — Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing — November, 1995

...FROM THE EDITOR...

The recent (Inter)National Writing Centers Association Conference was a celebration of being together with colleagues, enjoying marvelous festivities, and taking part in interesting conference sessions, all aptly summarized by NWCA President, Byron Stay (see page 15). As I walked through the conference corridors, I heard people hailing each other, thanking the other person for a particularly useful article they had read and used. That made me realize that timid prospective authors for our writing center publications don't sufficiently realize how much they can share through writing for the rest of us.

At a session on publishing, I also heard people murmur that they're "too new to the field," "not experienced enough," or "unsure" that they have anything to contribute. Clearly we all have insights, experience, and advice to offer each other, and if those comments at the conference from grateful readers are any indication, then getting your ideas into print is a service to the profession.

If you are one of our hesitant would-be authors, why not sit down at one of the tutorial tables in your center and ask a tutor to help you get started? And why not coax your tutors to do the same for the "Tutors' Column"?

• *Muriel Harris, editor*

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Training tutors for secondary school writing centers

Every time I train tutors for writing centers, I try a different approach. After a series of workshops with high school English teachers, we decided to train the student tutors as well. So this time, as I led four one-day workshops for junior and senior high school students in the Trumbull County School District, I decided to prepare them by focusing on three areas of the one-to-one conference: establishing rapport, giving positive reader response, and describing the text.

Establishing rapport

Since I believe tutors should be writers themselves, I chose an ice-breaker to help the students get acquainted and also give them a chance to begin the day by writing. I asked each person to bring a brown lunch sack full of objects that revealed their hobbies, interests, important relationships, and/or personalities. When they arrived, they swapped bags and began writing about their new mystery friend based on its contents. They were to use their imaginations and make predictions about the life of their new friends. After this freewriting exercise, students met their new friends, verified their impressions, and then introduced the friend to the rest of the group. The

following is an example of one student's piece.

> Who is she? I must determine what type of person she is by the evidence in a little, brown bag. . . . Nail file, cotton ball, penny, pen, and silver and blue bow. I've got it. This person obviously wants to become a police officer. Think about it. I've noticed that cops are always well-groomed, looking their best. And policemen are always so creative. They must be since they enjoy writing tickets for the most minor and bizarre reasons. Think about the silver and blue; I see a future in law enforcement. (KMK)

At first, the students were shy, nervous, and somewhat anxious about their new role as tutors. I was nervous about conducting the workshops because it has been four years since I left the ninth-grade classroom. As I was getting acquainted with each new group of students, I found that most of them equated "tutoring" with "teaching." Using this as a jumping off point, I asked the students to think of their favorite teacher. After they had a chance to visualize this teacher, I asked them to think of the characteristics of that teacher that made them special. Then using the "think-pair-share" strategy (Davidson and O'Leary), I asked them to share those characteristics with their neighbor. Eventually, they shared those characteristics with the whole group as I recorded them on an overhead transparency for all to examine. We then talked about the qualities of an effective teacher. The bottom line that seemed to both quell their anxiety and set the stage for the workshop was: How you treat people is more important than what you know; people need to know that you care before they will care about what you know.

We were then ready to engage in other relationship-building activities between tutor and tutee. David Taylor recommends "developing skills in establishing an atmosphere of *trust* and in *listening* and *understanding* so that we comprehend the significance of what the students say" (24). First we talked about "openers" that would create an atmosphere of trust and acceptance. We discussed ways of showing empathy, warmth, caring, and respect (27). Then, students simulated a one-to-one conference and practiced "opening" and "setting an agenda" for their conferences. Later, in a round-the-room session I asked them the following questions:

- What did your partner do to encourage you as a speaker?
- What did your partner do to discourage you as a speaker?
- Tell us one *new* bit of information you learned about your partner.

In getting-to-know and support each other, students learned to "make connections" and "establish the individuality" of the person next to them (M. Harris 41). Then, we were ready to work on listening and understanding skills necessary for tutoring.

Being quiet while someone talks does not constitute real listening. The key to real listening is wanting and intending to do so. Real listening is based on the intention to do one of four things: understand someone, enjoy someone, learn something, or give help to someone. If you want to understand someone, you can't help really listening to them. When you're enjoying a conversation or you intend to learn something, listening comes quite naturally. When you want to help someone express his or her feelings, you are involved, listening. Unfortunately, a lot of pseudo-listening masquerades as the real thing. Everyone is a pseudo-listener at times, but in a one-to-one conference, real listening is imperative. To help students recognize their own blocks to listening, we divided into small groups and brainstormed what constitutes "good listening" and "blocks-to- listening" behaviors. Then we compared their lists to the overhead transparencies for total listening and blocks to listening taken from McKay, Davis, and Fanning (1983). Here's how to be a total listener (28):

- Maintain good eye contact.
- Lean slightly forward.
- Reinforce the speaker by nodding or paraphrasing.
- Clarify by asking questions.
- Actively move away from distractions.
- Be committed to understanding what was said.

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Editor: Muriel Harris; Asst. to the Editor: Mary Jo Turley, English Dept., Purdue University, 1356 Heavilon, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356 (317)494-7268. e-mail:harrism@mace.cc.purdue.edu

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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.

For the significant people in your life, which of the following listening blocks do you typically use? (16-19):

- *Comparing*: You're always trying to assess who is smarter, more competent, more emotionally healthy.
- *Mind Reading*: You're always trying to figure out what the other person is *really* thinking and feeling.
- *Rehearsing*: You're rehearsing what to say next.
- *Filtering*: You listen to some things and not to others.
- *Judging*: Negative labels have enormous power.
- *Dreaming*: Something triggers a chain of private associations.
- *Identifying*: You take everything a person tells you and refer it back to your own experience.
- *Advising*: You are the great problem-solver, ready with help and suggestions.
- *Sparring*: You are quick to "put-down" or discount what the person is saying.
- *Being Right*: You will go to any lengths to be right.
- *Derailing*: You change the subject when you get bored or uncomfortable.
- *Placating*: You agree with everything to avoid conflict and be nice, pleasant, and supporting.

Having identified characteristics of good and poor listening, students were ready to monitor their listening habits in the next one-to-one conference simulation. For this simulation tutees took their "mystery friend" pieces to the tutor for feedback. In order to practice total listening skills, I suggested that the tutee read the piece aloud and choose one of the following strategies for descriptive responding given by Hamilton-Wieler:

- *Sharing Without Responding*: the tutee reads the draft; the tutor listens attentively responding only with a thank-you.
- *Say Back*: the tutor responds by paraphrasing what she/he heard the text saying.
- *Pointing*: the tutee asks a question of the text; the tutor "points" to specific places that answers the question.

Through developing stronger communication skills, students learned how to show interest and listen to each other in a writing conference setting. According to Judith Kollman, "Above all, the conference exists to communicate my interest in, and respect for, the individual human being with whom I am talking" (15). Having learned to establish rapport between tutor and tutee, tutors were ready to learn to give positive responses to the tutee's piece of writing.

Giving positive reader-response

When I read David Daiker's study of teachers' comments on students' writing pieces, I was astounded by the lack of positive reinforcement found in the teaching of writing. Results showed that 89.4% of the instructor's comments written on college freshman essays were focused on corrections, while only 10.6% focused on accomplishments of the paper (103). Comments on essays made by high school teachers were slightly more positive. While 40% of the end comments were positive, only .007% of marginal comments were positive (W.H. Harris). These results reflect the "school" tradition which encourages a response to student writing based primarily on identifying and penalizing error.

In order to become teachers in a "positive, joyous, creative, and responsible sense," Christensen urges us to replace the inert, rule-encumbered school tradition with more enlightened scholarly views. Several recent composition scholars have reported emphasizing responding with encouragement. Paul B. Diederich concluded from his research in evaluation that "noticing and praising whatever a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly" (20). Ken Macrorie recommends that we "encourage and encourage, but never falsely" (688). For William E. Irmscher, "the psychology of positive reinforcement . . . should be the major resource for every writing teacher" (150). All of these individuals would support reading students' texts John Dixon's way: for *achievements* in writing, for the *resources* the student brings to the writing, and for the *constraints* on the writing.

But praise, however beneficial as a motivator of student writing, is more easily enjoined than put into practice. When I started to learn to praise, I followed Daiker's strategy of making only positive comments on the first reading of the text (107). R. W. Reising's technique is even more effective: he has developed a grading form that requires him to write one to three positive comments before even considering noting a weakness (43). The difficulty that most people have in learning to praise is how to make comments that move beyond generic ones: "nice," "good job," and/or "well-written." Other generic comments such as "diction," "logic," or "awkward" are almost always misunderstood by students unless explained in detail. Don Murray once recommended his favorite response to student writing that avoids generic remarks. He suggested beginning with the five words "I like the way you...." I asked the tutors to make a comment about their new friend's paper and complete the sentence in any way they chose:

- I like the way you use dialogue here.
- I like the way you started the paper with a story.

Another way to learn to give positive feedback is what Peter Elbow calls strategically focused praise. First acknowledge the weakest feature of the piece—e.g., "You have a problem here with organization." Then, since people learn much faster when they are asked to do more of what they already *have* been doing, show the student places where there is *some* organization or *impulse toward* organization. "Here's where you've made some moves in the right direction. Do more." It's easier to "do more of these things she *has* been do-

ing," than "do more of these things she *hasn't* been doing."

According to Rosemary Deen, "What kills teaching is pursuing error and weakness in others. What enables teaching is releasing students' energy by defining their success" (573). This sounds well and good, but how do I train myself as well as the tutors to define students' success in writing? To get started, I turned to Peter Elbow's "Spectrum of Ways to Respond to Student Writing" that he handed out at a CCCC Conference. I used three of Elbow's strategies to help tutors focus on the strengths of the writing. The first strategy is to reply as a human to the paper as a human utterance, not just as a verdict-giver. To reply as a human reader is a crucial act of respect: to take the writer's view seriously enough to reply to *what* she says—instead of ignoring or sidestepping it with a meta-comment about *how* she says it. In order to give a humane reply, summarizing, paraphrasing and/or clarifying are methods of acknowledging the writer's view. The following are examples of replying as a human:

- Your experience of working on the dairy farm is an asset in setting the context for your paper.
- Your sense of humor and ability to "laugh" at yourself made this paper particularly interesting.
- In spite of your health problems, you managed to submit an excellent revision of this paper.

The second strategy is to praise the text: What's strong, what works, what pleases you? Even if the paper is weak, what are the strongest features? What are nascent, potential strengths that might be exploited in revising? Here are examples of "praising the text" given by students about their mystery friend papers:

- I liked your description of the plastic, diamond-shaped toy which lit up with flashing red lights when it was squeezed.
- How did you guess that your new friend has a sense of humor from the joker playing card that you found in the bag?
- I'd like to meet the family and friends you tell about so well in your paper.

In the next strategy, movies of the mind, the tutor thinks back at the text and tries to reconstruct the story of what was going on inside her as she listened to or read the text. What was happening moment by moment? What thoughts and feelings occurred? The object is to give an honest, subjective response to the piece of writing that confirms or disconfirms the writer's intentions.

Describing the text

In addition to praising the text, Elbow uses descriptive feedback for various reasons. He says "It's something to say when you can't think of anything else, and it helps the writer learn to see his own text better." He also suggests this kind of response is a gesture of respect and a way of treating the student as a writer. This strategy is called "describe the text and how it functions." The point is to be non-judgmental and describe as many features of the piece as possible. For instance,one way to describe the text is to summarize what the paper says. Richard Beach, who also recommends this strategy, says the description stage of writing assessment consists of describing five basic elements: goals for content and audience, logical or rhetorical strategies, audience characteristics, text structure or genre, and role or persona (134). He suggests the following questions to guide tutors in giving descriptive feedback in the writing conference:

- What are you trying to say or show in this section?
- What are you trying to do in this section?
- What are some specific characteristics of your audience?
- What are you trying to get your audience to do or think?
- How would you describe your organization or type of writing?
- How would you describe your own role or orientation? (133)

When writers justify their texts by considering their goals, strategies, and/or audience characteristics, they engage in recursive assessment of their papers in a positive context.

As tutors become more comfortable with praising and describing the text, they may want to try using the four levels of praise suggested by Nina Ziv (1984). She recommends making positive comments at the conceptual, structural, sentential, and lexical levels. The conceptual level describes strengths in the ideas, examples, reasons, details, scope, insights, thesis. The following are examples of positive conceptual level comments:

- "Your thesis—that the new American ideal is 'something for nothing'—is strong and clear.
- "Your thesis is interesting and clear, and your use of particular, graphic details to support the thesis greatly aids your reader's understanding. The conversational tone of your paper also helps the reader understand you."
- "The content of this paper is interesting and to the point, the essay is fairly well unified, and you show the ability to use effective details."

Structural level comments describe the organization, focus, introduction, development, anecdote, and/or conclusion. Examples of specific structural level comments are as follows:

- "The paper is well-organized and well-focused, with some nice paragraph transitions.
- "Good strategy for your opening; you caught my attention."
- "I got a good first impression of this paper. You've started out well with an anecdote that gives the reader a good visual picture and gets her into your thesis."

The sentential level describes sentence features such as length, variety, parallel-

ism, and/or clarity. Sentential level comments are as follows:

- "Good parallelism" (refers to third sentence of third paragraph and to first two sentences of last paragraph).
- "Effect closing image. Good!"
- "Very nice pair of sentences—clear and concise" (refers to first two sentences of fourth paragraph).

Lexical level comments focusing on word choice, vocabulary, phrasing, rhythm, and/or title are as follows:

- "You have a vigorous and full vocabulary."
- "Nice series—good climax" (refers to "soft, easy, free" of second paragraph).
- "Nice phrase" (refers to "with glamour and greed in her eyes").

With positive, descriptive comments, the tutee should begin to take the initiative, to self-evaluate, to make decisions, and to take control of the paper.

Evaluation of the workshop for tutor training

At the end of each one-day workshop, I asked students to tell me about two things they learned that they didn't know before. The results showed how students perceived the training. Some students focused their comments toward what they learned about the writing process:

- I learned the stages of the writing cycle in detail.
- I learned some of the steps in writing such as freeflowing, cubing (Hamilton-Wieler), and framing (Proett and Gill).
- I learned heuristics for drafting and revising.

Other students mentioned that they learned communication skills necessary for tutoring.

- I learned about giving constructive criticism, but also to give compliments and not do someone's work for them.
- I didn't know you needed so many listening skills to tutor.
- I learned that "empathy" means to "understand."
- Having empathy is more important than correcting grammar.
- I learned how to be honest with people I help.
- Tutors shouldn't hold pencils and take over the text.
- Tutees should set the agenda for the writing conference.

Another group of students told about responding strategies that they learned during the workshop.

- I learned to start my response with "I like the way you. . . ."
- I learned to give feedback through "Pointing" and "Say Back."
- I learned how to make positive comments and find strengths in a piece of writing.
- That you should stay away from generic comments and find specific strengths of the writing to praise.
- I learned how to ask questions that are open so that they [the writer] will start thinking in new directions.

Even though the goals for these tutor training sessions were somewhat ambitious, I feel they were successful since there was a high congruence between what the students learned and what the trainer taught. However, the real proof of the learning will be when the tutors take their places in the new writing centers in their schools, and students become better writers as a result of the tutoring.

Jacqueline N. Glasgow
Kent State University
Warren, OH

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For Your Resource Shelf

Writing Center Perspectives. Edited by Byron L. Stay, Christina Murphy, and Eric Hobson. NWCA Press: Emmitsburg, MD: 1995. 192 pp., paperbound: $12. (ISBN 0-9648067-0-3)

For information about this collect of eighteen essays from the 1994 National Writing Centers Association Conference, contact Christina Murphy, Writing Center, Texas Christian University, Box 32875, Fort Worth, TX 76129. To order a copy, send her a check for $12, made payable to NWCA. For additional information on NWCA Press, contact Byron L. Stay, Director, NWCA Press, P.O. Box 7007, Emmitsburg, MD 21727.

The Young Person's Guide to Becoming a Writer. By Janet E. Grant. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, Inc., 1995. 184 pp., paperbound: $13.95 (ISBN 0-915793-90-3)

This book is intended for young people, ages 12 and older, who love to write or aspire to be "real" writers. Chapters focus on discovering their writing style, exploring new types of writing, experimenting with genres, evaluating their own work, finding the right publisher, preparing manuscripts for submission, getting paid, linking up with the writing community, and getting support from parents, teachers, and friends. The author is an award-winning consultant and founder of the International Young Authors' Camps. To order, call 1-800-735-7323, fax: 612-337-5050, or write Free Spirit Publishing Inc., 400 First Avenue North, Suite 616, Minneapolis, MN 55401.

Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals
April 13, 1996
Chestertown, Maryland
Keynote speaker: Leigh Ryan

Proposals are invited from teachers, administrators, directors, researchers, peer and professional tutors interested in the teaching of writing in universities, colleges, and high schools. Suggested topics include the role of writing in the academy, writing center teaching and administration, curriculum development and approaches to teaching writing, the use of computers in writing instruction, new writing centers, the training of tutors, strategies for conferencing with writers, and writing across the curriculum. Please submit proposals in triplicate by January 19, 1996 to Gerry Fisher, MAWCA Chair, Washington College Writing Center, Smith Hall 31, Washington College, Chestertown, MD 21620. For further information call 410-778-7263 or e-mail: gerry_fisher@washcoll.edu

Daring to deal with diversity

Writing centers see a diversity of writers at varying levels of competency and incompetency, with all kinds of rhetorical questions, and from many different life experiences. Nowhere are these differences more obvious than in a community college where the challenge of meeting the individual writer's needs is constant. In Johnson County Community College's Writing Center, students drop in for tutoring often not even sure why they are there or what to ask for. Because close to 100 students visit the Writing Center daily, tutors must be trained in strategies that will help them recognize the individual needs of these writers and teaching techniques that provide appropriate instruction.

Our three main populations are the returning adult, the ESL student, and the underprepared student. Returning adults who are continuing their education or who want to review skills needed for writing often are reticent about their writing ability. They need to learn strategies to help them get started. They need to have their confidence in their own abilities boosted. Non-native students (ESL) have ideas but can't express them clearly because of their inexperience with the language. Sentence structure, verb tense, word choice, and articles are all obstacles to overcome. At the rough draft stage, these students need more guidance in their revision. Taking several sentences and "walking" them through the revision helps. Then, sitting back and *allowing* them to do the same while watching is helpful. Tutors must learn patience and take a sort of tough love approach. For the underprepared students, the problem is often inexperience with writing. They tend to write superficially and need to learn to think more critically about their topics. Questioning is very helpful to get the students thinking about their subjects.

Anecdotal evidence supports the importance of setting up a hierarchy of areas for tutors to work on and an on-going training program to ensure tutor effectiveness. Using the steps of the writing process, we can examine effective tutoring strategies for working with students at different levels of expertise on a variety of writing assignments. We start with the assignment's goals, then move to the focus of the paper, its development and organization, followed by looking at sentence structure, word choice, and style.

In the invention stage of writing, tutors use brainstorming techniques and questioning skills to talk a student through his/her topic. In early training sessions, tutors become cognizant of differences in learning styles, the importance of acquiring acute listening skills, and an awareness of what each student may or may not bring to the tutoring session. In the drafting stage, tutors consider the writer's thesis and support, the writer's ability to think critically about his/her topic, audience and viewpoint, and organization and development. Knowing what to look for and how to get the student to respond is essential guidance training for peer tutors.

When the more advanced writer comes in, editing becomes a matter of stylistic choices, so the tutor needs to know how to guide the student through the maze of word choices, sentence structures, tone, and mood. For the novice writer, editing means sentence completeness, paragraph development, clarity and word tightening. Tutors learn which Writing Center materials will best help each student according to his/her needs.

In our tutor training sessions, we use student writing which depicts the various stages or levels of writer competence. We group the tutors so that we balance the experienced tutors with new tutors. Then, each group is given a sheet which has a variety of poor student writing samples. For example, we will use a weak thesis statement to show the need for improving invention skills. Sometimes just talking about the assignment and its goals helps the student discover a focus. The tutors discuss the problem of the writing and how it can be corrected. They also devise questions which lead the writer to a solution.

For problems with organizing and developing, we use student samples riddled with jumbled paragraphs, incoherent arrangement of sentences, and faulty support. Again, the tutors must come up with the questions they would need to ask to prod the writer toward his/her own correcting. Helping the writer to see how the parts are connected to the whole is an important role of the tutor.

For revising, we include samples which illustrate sentence level problems, inappropriate word choice, and wordiness. We also include some writing from non-native students which demonstrates poor syntax and misused articles and prepositions. We model how we can pull several sentences from the writing, discuss how they can be corrected, then how we encourage the student to revise while we sit nearby.

In all of the writing samples, we include mechanical problems such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The tutors learn quickly that those are not the kinds of problems we deal with initially. In fact, since we emphasize that we do not proofread, we must remind visiting students that they will need to look for those errors themselves and ask us specific questions later, a task which should not be completed until ev-

erything else in the paper is corrected.

Guidelines for students using the Center are encased in a plastic stand on each tutor table. The guidelines include our expectations of our clientele:

1. If you plan on using the Writing Center on a regular basis, you must be enrolled in a JCCC class or in a Writing Center course (credit or noncredit). Tutors help with writing skills only.

2. Know your assignment.

3. Come prepared with questions about
   a. a rough draft
   b. an assignment (bring assignment sheet)
   c. a final draft

4. Do not expect tutors to evaluate (grade) your paper. Instead, tutors will give you constructive feedback on organizational and developmental problems.

5. Do not expect to spend more than 15-20 minutes with a tutor.

6. Do not expect tutors to proofread your drafts. They will not find all of your errors for you. That's your job.

7. Realize that the tutors have a responsibility to all of the students who come in, so try not to monopolize their time. Be respectful and don't interrupt them when they're working with other students.

8. Remember the tutors are here to help with your writing skills, so keep focused on writing-related problems.

9. Learn strategies to help yourself edit and proofread your own writing.

10. Learn the hierarchy of concerns (these are listed on a separate page) which guide the tutor through the session.

11. It is fine to get different feedback from different tutors, but remember that each tutor will critique from his/her viewpoint, so you need to sort through the suggestions and decide which ones you want to use in your revision. Remember it's your paper.

12. If you have a problem with advice a tutor gave you, please talk to the coordinator of the Writing Center.

"No Proofreading" signs hanging throughout the Center remind tutors that they're not fix-it machines. However, check lists, handouts, and computer software enhance how the tutors help students correct already marked papers or papers about to be handed in. Tutors work at learning what resources are available so that all students get the right kind of help on the writing problems they have.

Regardless of who comes through the Writing Center door, help is ready because tutors have been trained. Tutors know the strategies which must be practiced to put the responsibility of the writing on the writer, not the tutor.

Ellen Mohr
Johnson County Community College
Overland Park, KS

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

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

Feb. 29-March 2: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Austin, TX
Contact: Elizabeth Piedmont-Marton, Undergraduate Writing Center, FAC 211, G3000, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712

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 1-2: East Central Writing Centers Association, in East Lansing, MI
Contact: Sharon Thomas, The Writing Center, 300 Bessey Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI (517-423-3610).

March 2: New England Writing Centers Association, in Amherst, MA
Contact: Mary Bartosenki, Writing Center 402, Neville Hall, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469

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

April 13: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Chestertown, MD
Contact: Gerry Fisher, Writing Center, Smith 31, Washington College, Chestertown, MD 21620 (410-778-7263).

Tutors' Column

Getting Started

She did not want to be here. A few subtle hints had given it away. She breezed into the Writing Center looking very businesslike and efficient. Throwing her paper onto the table with a "Read that and sign it for me, will ya?" she turned briskly on her heel and headed again for the door.

In these types of situations, I could never decide who to be madder at, the teacher who assigned students to come here without informing them of our purpose, or the students themselves for not taking the time to discover how the Writing Center could help them. Glancing at the top of her paper, I found her name was Susan. "Hey, Susan," I called to her retreating figure. "Wait a minute, I've got a question to ask you."

Susan stopped in her tracks, her shoulders slumped, and she shuffled back to my table. Pulling out the chair furthest away from me, she plopped into it and heaved a big sigh. Crossing her arms and leaning back in her chair, she fixed me with a cool, calculating stare.

What I said next was vitally important to how the rest of the session would go. I needed to get her involved in this process of writing in a way she obviously was not used to, by sharing with a peer. "Susan, what do you see are the weaknesses in your paper?"

For a while she didn't say anything as she glared at me with that all too familiar "Isn't that your job?" question in her eyes. But that was the point of my question—I am not here to tell writers how or what to write. My job is to help them discover that for themselves. Too many students come into the Writing Center thinking that the peer tutors are like professors. They fear that their paper will be evaluated and searched for errors with a fine-toothed comb.

Susan shifted uncomfortably in her seat, then slowly pulled her paper towards her and began flipping through it. "Well, this is only a rough draft—it still needs some finishing touches. I wasn't sure how to make the transition to the second part of my paper. And I'm not certain I want to include this last bit of information at all. What do you think?"

This time she handed me the paper shyly while looking at me intently. Simply giving her a chance to raise the questions she wanted to ask made the session one of two writers exploring the process of writing, instead of a tutor telling a peer how to write. Getting started is always the hardest part. Giving writers a feeling of authority over their papers enables them to join in the conversation about writing, instead of always playing the passive role of listeners.

As peer tutors, we have a special ability to help fellow writers recognize and fix problems in their own writing without fear of evaluation. In the writing center, we have the unique chance to work through a draft together, discussing the writer's thoughts and apprehensions, as well as the paper itself. We have the opportunity to turn writing into a process, not just another paper. So when "Susan" walks through your door looking for help, get her involved in the process, and get her excited about writing.

Merri-Lynn Roques
Peer tutor
Gordon College
Wenham, MA

East Central Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals
March 1-2, 1996
East Lansing, Michigan

Deadline for proposals: January 30, 1996. For further information, contact Sharon Thomas, The Writing Center, 300 Bessey Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824. Phone: 517-432-3610; fax: 517-432-3828; e-mail: Thomasss@pilot.msu. edu

The writing center, Lyotard, and postmodernism

"No doctor before the end of the eighteenth century had ever thought of listening to the content–how it was said and why–of these words [those spoken by the 'madman']; and yet it was these which signaled the difference between reason and madness" (Foucault 217).

Foucault's revelation about the mad–those whose speech was excluded from the "common discourse of men" (217)–helps me to understand how some of my colleagues–in the English department and throughout the academy–can refer to those whose "texts" do not conform to Standard Written English, or that are not "academic" enough, as "'the truly illiterate among us'" (qtd. in Rose 2). If those who guard the academy are not questioned, however, the writing center remains always a "fix-it" shop, a place that patches the cracks in the traditional paradigm, rather than a welcoming community to those whose rhetorical stances are as diverse and as interesting[1] as there are people.

What is postmodern in the writing center?

What I propose is that the questions inherent in so-called postmodern theories of language and literature are like those we in the writing center have been posing. For example, the movements in writing centers toward a more social or collaborative mode of operating have served to "problematize" traditional theories and practices of language and literature. In fact, postmodern views of language as anti-foundational or anti-representational–that is, denying the mirror/lamp theory of knowledge that supposedly illustrates "Truth" with a capital T, or that reflects "M"eaning with a capital M–have been defended by many writing center scholars–from Kenneth Bruffee to Andrea Lunsford. When Bruffee and Lunsford and others talk about anti-foundational notions of writing and group-licensed ways of generating texts, they challenge the prevailing assumptions of the field, including such notions as Standard Written English, Expository Writing, Thesis, Topic Sentence, Coherence, etc. Thinkers like Bruffee and Lunsford open doors for writers heretofore locked out of the "literate" community of writers. They do not see the so-called "illiterate among us" in quite the same pejorative way as their traditional counterparts do. They might see the value, as we in the writing center have, in the production of a story, ritual, or reflection that traditional compositionists can only affirm as inherent in the academic exposition, argument, or persuasive essay.

I'd like to suggest that some reflection on Lyotard's work *The Postmodern Condition (1989)* may provide those of us who work in the writing center with additional ideas that may aid in our ongoing endeavor to make writing centers the best next thing in composition instruction. To be fair, some may find aspects of these ideas disturbing. This is because Lyotard denies the meta-narratives of the traditional or modern world: the militant liberator of humanity (in the tradition of the French Revolution) and the speculative unity of all knowledge (in the Hegelian tradition). The modernists among us, and I really have to count myself among them at times, may see citing Lyotard as a dangerous affirmation of the glamour or spectacle of writing, and they may find that idea irresponsible in the same way that they may find the developments of late capitalism repugnant. They, like myself, desire a social politics; yet, they say such a politics cannot be forthcoming in any postmodern theory of knowledge. They fear most Lyotard's insistence that everything becomes local, ad hoc, immanent. I agree that these are problems for all of us groomed in the tradition of the great modernist narratives. But I cannot help but notice in Lyotard an acute recognition of the failures brought about by such narratives. For me, Lyotard at least offers a way to argue against the affirmation of traditional values and characteristics in writing (i. e., Standard Written English), to argue for differences in writing, and to celebrate all that writing that happens despite the academy's rigid constraints.

Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* and the writing center

Very early into *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard asserts, "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (xxv). Here, I am reminded of the effort Mina Shaughnessy put into trying to educate us about non-standard writers. She was sensitive to differences; she could tolerate the incommensurable. Shaughnessy tried to show us the value behind what traditionalists had seen as incomprehensible in so-called basic writing. Shaughnessy's work was profoundly influential to those of us who have been involved with the writing center movement. One such Shaughnessy follower is Bruffee, who, almost single-handedly, elevated the status of the writing center to a level far removed from the ad hoc "fix it"

place traditionalists wanted the center to remain. In thinking about what Lyotard says here, I am reminded that Bruffee's *Short Course* is really a primer in collaborative learning, a methodology that extends Shaughnessy's idea that writing is part of an ongoing conversation and that invites, as did Shaughnessy, writers of all social levels and intellectual abilities to join in on that conversation. Lyotard's statement also reminds me that current writing center people, constantly working as teacher-researchers in the tradition described by Dixie Goswami and Stephen North, among others, are beginning to illustrate that effective writing is being produced by non-native writers as well as from non-standard perspectives. To traditionalists, such writing is not effective because it is non-traditional and therefore incomprehensible. To these teacher-researchers involved in the writing center, such writing simply extends the boundary of "academic" discourse.

As the above suggests, Lyotard has a great deal to say about the value of practice (performativity, he calls it) in the postmodern world. He writes:

> In contemporary society and culture–postindustrial society, postmodern culture–the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.
>
> The decline of narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means . . . . (37)

It seems to me that many of us feel as if we need to carry out "guerrilla warfare" with our self-proclaimed, research-oriented counterparts in the academy–and even with our closest counterparts in literature–because our work in the writing center is, largely, pedagogical–focused on the process of learning, rather than on mastering a body of knowledge; on the means, rather than the end. According to Lyotard, however, all we can count on any longer is local practice. It seems to me fitting, therefore, that practice should drive our initiatives in the postmodern writing center. This practice has demonstrated, for the past two decades,[2] that learning is eminently more interesting, if not more democratic, this way.

Lyotard also discusses what it is like living in a postmodern world; it may not be cataclysmic after all: "Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity" (41). When we find ourselves constantly embroiled in debate with our traditional colleagues over the value of instruction we offer in the writing center, we are under the gun to take the high road. We reproduce scholarship; we reproduce argumentation about the value of collaboration; we reproduce studies that acknowledge the merit of what we are doing; we remind people of the paradigm shift taking place. And, then, as I show in this essay, we become more understandable to our colleagues. This is because we have readied reasonable discourse for an arena of debate with rational people. We resort to a modernist podium, and so always feel a little frustrated–as if we are constantly reinventing the wheel. What we must do now is take the next step, the only one Lyotard believes is left to take: Remove ourselves from a nostalgic reliance upon what no longer works, and perform in the postmodern. This is not to suggest that anything goes; it is to affirm that more and different kinds of work are being produced and we have already agreed to celebrate it all.[3]

Reading Lyotard can also help us to understand why we'll face problems when, say, we try to extend the conversation about the plurality of writing, about collaborative learning, about power outside of the writing center. He writes:

> The technocrats declare that they cannot trust what society designates as its needs; they "know" that society cannot know its own needs since they are not variables independent of the new technologies. Such is the arrogance of the decision makers—and their blindness . . . . [that they say] "Adapt your aspirations to our ends—or else." (63-4)

Just as those who affirm Lyotard's postmodern condition will be criticized for their efforts, we in the writing center will be asked to compromise, at the very least, our positions. We will be asked to forget about being right, to adapt what we do, say, to the English department's program, to provide statistics on the numbers of tutees we see in order to justify our budget proposals for next year, to remain on the margins.

We must remember that we know better. Working in the writing center we have become aware of the self-discovering that should take place as a student goes through the academy is sometimes stifled in the traditional paradigm. In that world, we have learned, competition is promoted in a myopic search for the "best" student. We know that this search profits precious few students; in fact, we work with the many who end up branded with that ugly tattoo, "the truly illiterate among us." We've talked about writing with these stigmatized students, who too often equate their supposed "low rank" with their self-worth and, as a result, isolate themselves, fearing that any attempt at integration may be met with ridicule. And we have come to deplore that attitude which associates non-participation in a learning activity with behavior dysfunction; we know that what it really is is fear of oppression. The writing center–open and supportive–has demonstrated to us that such fears can be met and overcome. That's why I say we know better than to adapt our aspirations to anyone's else's program but our own.

But it just doesn't seem right

Modernists (traditionalists) are, quite understandably, skeptics of post-modernists. Social and literary critics see in Lyotard only an affirmation of the extension of capitalism, or the cultural logic of

late capitalism. Feminist critics see in Lyotard contradiction and the abandonment of social criticism. Now, I agree that it might be a problem to think about our postmodern condition as Lyotard does. But it's not a problem that particularly bothers me. I think the only thing we give up with Lyotard's way of operating is a lingering desire to affirm what is no longer possible in the postmodern world. I mean, we may no longer have read the fifty-star theme; we may begin to recognize as effective writing the story of the young man caught up in the ghetto fashioned by late capitalism, or the reinscribed images of the young woman struggling to write her body. We may no longer have to prescribe rules for the elimination of comma splices, fragments, and lapses in agreement; we may begin to recognize that the writing group itself agrees to decide upon what rules of usage and grammar make sense for their developing texts. We may be saying that traditional research is an outmoded exercise; we may begin to recognize that the only worthwhile research is that which we generate (and then later narrate) while we are practicing. In the end, we really threaten with postmodern ideas that percolate in our Burkean Parlors, our collaborative writing centers, because

> [t]he idea of a writing center informed by a theory of knowledge as socially constructed, of power and control as constantly negotiated and shared, and as collaboration as its first principle presents quite a challenge . . . . to higher education, an institution that insists on rigidly controlled individual performance, on evaluation as punishment, on isolation. (Lunsford 5)

Albert C. DeCiccio
Merrimack College
North Andover, MA

Notes

[1] As we near the end of Toni Morrison's *Sula,* Sula–racked with the physical and emotional distress that precedes death–reflects on her mother's self-immolation. Sula is feeling momentarily guilty because, being so fascinated by the event, she did not try to save her mother. She found what her mother had done to be interesting, and the act was not to be judged or stopped. As difficult as it may be to accept, I believe that if we saw our world in this way we might get closer to realizing our stated goals regarding diversity, multiculturalism, plurality. We therefore need to be intrigued, not judgmental, by the varied writing of our students.

[2] Purdue's Writing Lab is into its second decade and is considered the first "writing center" that was not merely an ad hoc measure to patch the cracks of a traditional paradigm. For about that long, then, writing centers have become the best next thing in writing instruction.

[3] At Phillips (Andover), a writing workshop modeled on the principles of collaborative learning as well as on the principles espoused by Dixie Goswami and the Bread Loaf School of Writing has provoked inner-city, middle-school students to see expressive, nontraditional writing as a way out of oppression and depression. As a matter of fact, one young writer recently proclaimed at a public reading: "I feel a power coming all over me with words!"

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The New England Writing Centers Association

March 2, 1996
Amherst, MA
"The Writing Center: End Zone? Twilight Zone? Contact Zone?"
Keynote speakers: Anne Herrington and Charles Moran

For further information, contact Mary Bartosenski, NEWCA Chair, The Writing Center 402, Neville Hall, The University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469 (maryb@maine.maine.edu) or Meg Carroll (mcarroll@grog.ric.edu)

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Sharers and Seclusionists

Several people have asked me recently whether last month's column signaled the end of the "Writing Center Ethics" series in the *Writing Lab Newsletter.* I suppose the column did have a bit of an elegiac tone to it, but only because I was wrapping up an extended series of columns and felt the need to give it a clear sense of closure. No, I'm afraid you can't get rid of me that easily. You're stuck with me for the duration. (Or until Muriel Harris gets tired of seeing my name in print*.) That said, let me segue quickly into the topic for this month's column.

One of the most interesting, provocative and educational discussions I engaged in at the recent National Writing Centers Association conference in St. Louis concerned the extent to which tutors should communicate with faculty about what goes on in individual tutorials. Nearly all of the participants in the workshop discussion had varying opinions about what should remain private, what should be shared with instructors, and what was free to disseminate publicly. It was not always easy to distinguish exactly what led each of us to form or maintain the opinions we held, though all of us believed that our opinions were quite ethical under our respective institutional and personal circumstances.

At the risk of oversimplifying the positions which most of us held to a greater or lesser degree, I think that we could be said to fall into one of two groups: the sharers or the seclusionists. The sharers were those who felt that it was perfectly acceptable to share information with faculty—to certify that students attended sessions in the center, to send reports to instructors that explained what was covered in conferences, to work with faculty members to track the progress of individual students, and to support one another's efforts through the free exchange of information. The seclusionists, on the other hand, felt that the writing center should be viewed as an entity entirely separate from classrooms and that faculty should not be privy to the substance of tutor/student discussions. Seclusionists thought of writing centers as a kind of refuge where students could talk about their writing problems freely, without concern that reports of their weaknesses and/or insecurities would go beyond the boundaries of the conference itself.

According to the seclusionists, tutors who report to faculty about student conferences are violating confidentiality and setting themselves up as "service workers" for instructors; according to the sharers, tutors who isolate the center from the classroom restrict the possibilities for true student learning and productive relationships with faculty. At the start of the conversation, I must admit that I fell pretty firmly into the seclusionist camp. By the end of the discussion, I was moving somewhere closer to the middle.

Interestingly—though perhaps not so surprisingly—the sharers at our table tended to be from relatively small four-year colleges or two-year community colleges while the seclusionists tended to be from big universities. The more we talked, the more this correlation seemed to make sense. All of us argued at length about how our respective ethical positions on this matter were motivated by a concern for students' welfare, but we had distinctly different views about how that welfare was best served, and these views were generally shaped by our institutional affiliations.

Many of the sharers talked about the close relationship they had with faculty in different departments and the concern that those faculty had for making sure their students' writing improved. They talked about collegiality, about a unified educational experience for students, about how sensitivity to student needs and emotions prevented tutors from passing on inappropriate details to instructors, and about how students appreciated the coordinated guidance they received from tutors and faculty in conjunction. Sometimes, they said, there were slip-ups (as when tutors included commentary about instructor assignments in their report slips), sometimes there were misunderstandings (as when tutors failed to discuss aspects of student writing that the faculty members thought were particularly important), and sometimes there were downright conflicts (as when a certain faculty member thought he had the right to walk into the writing center and browse freely through student files). But rough spots and all, the sharers claimed that the system was beneficial to students and their writing, did not violate students' rights, and promoted closer connections with faculty across campus.

The seclusionists—myself included—painted a somewhat different picture of faculty/student relationships on our campuses, often using terms like "alienated students," "impersonal teaching situations," and "disaffected faculty." We talked about huge lecture classes, distant and/or difficult-to-reach instructors, and the many little ways in which students were depersonalized by huge administrative hierarchies and educational agendas that value individual research more than student teaching. [This is not to say that there are not vast numbers of caring, helpful professors in big universities. Of

course there are. I've met many of them. But economies of size in large institutions frequently prevent even the most conscientious instructors from interacting with all their students as closely as they might wish.] The writing center, said the seclusionists, was one of the few places on campus where students could get the "personal touch" in instruction that was so often lacking elsewhere in their university experience. It was a place where students could feel safe, secure, and warmly treated, a place where they could talk with tutors who placed their (the students') needs first, a place where they could say anything they wanted about the instructor or the assignment or their developing texts or their writing anxieties and not have to worry about that information being passed along to others. The writing center protected student privacy, safeguarded student rights, and gave students individual attention while helping them with their writing.

At the same time, the seclusionists (well, me anyway) also talked about some of the strange ironies of our position. All of us work hard to educate faculty and students that the writing center is not just for—how shall I put it—the rhetorically challenged. We work with writers at all levels of ability and skill, and (at my institution, at least) we have nearly as many conferences with graduate students as we do with undergraduates. We really want people to see us as a resource, not as a remedial center. Nevertheless, we can't deny that there often remains a "stigma" associated with visiting the writing center, and a number of the students we see would prefer that it not become common knowledge that they do so. This attitude is changing, I think, but it has not disappeared, and many seclusionists (and sharers too, I suspect) feel a responsibility to respect student wishes for privacy even as we wish students would feel less embarrassed about coming to see us. In acceding to student wishes, then, seclusionists may be indirectly supporting representations of the writing center that they are, at the same time, actively fighting to overcome. But by the same token, sharers—by opening the tutorial conference to faculty review—may be undermining whatever claims to theoretical and institutional independence they wish to make and subverting any chance of a close relationship with students who may see them as little more than faculty stool pigeons.

As I mentioned earlier in this column, I began to shift toward a middle ground in my position on faculty reports as a result of the workshop discussion. I still see the potential for problems with such an arrangement, and I would still never permit my tutors to sign papers or other forms to "certify" that a student had been to the writing center, but I think now I would allow tutors to send information about conferences back to faculty—as long as the student provides his or her informed consent. If the student says it's okay to let the instructor know what he and the tutor talked about in the conference, I see no reason not to pass the details along. If the student says she'd rather keep the details of the conference private, then the writing center will never let the faculty member know that she came or what was discussed. To me, that seems a workable compromise, and one that I can't see any reasonable student or faculty member (or writing center?) objecting to.

But then, I've been wrong before.

I plan to continue thinking and writing about the issue of privacy next month when I reflect on a related topic that arose recently in the WCENTER newsgroup: should tutorial conferences take place behind partitions or in open spaces? See you then.

Michael A. Pemberton
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

(Editor's note: Given the highly favorable response to Michael Pemberton's columns, this is not a likely scenario.)*

South Central Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals
Feb.29-March 2, 1996
Austin, Texas
Writing Centers Within Institutions
Keynote speakers: Jeanne Simpson and Sheldon Ekland-Olson

We invite proposals from classroom instructors, writing center and university administrators, and graduate and undergraduate consultants and tutors. Send proposals for individual or panel presentations by DECEMBER 1, 1995 to Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, Coordinator, SCWCA Conference, Undergraduate Writing Center, FAC 211, G3000, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712. Please include the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of all presenters and indicate what if any audio-visual equipment you will need. Decisions will be announced by mail by January 1.

News from the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA)

I enjoyed seeing many of you at the 2nd (Inter)national Writing Centers Conference in St. Louis, MO. For those who couldn't make it, you ought to know that Eric Hobson put on a terrific show complete with an apron poster session lunch, an evening workshop on the rhetoric of riverboat gambling, and a special interest session: "Bleacher Tutoring," held during a St. Louis Cardinals baseball game at Busch Stadium. There were also (seriously) post-conference workshops on learning disabilities and on using the Internet.

The NWCA Executive Board was also busy endorsing a new constitution and making plans for future directions. Just before adjourning to the NWCA Party at the Bowling Hall of Fame, the Board met to deliberate on a number of issues:

New NWCA Constitution.
The new constitution, which has been shepherded through various revisions by Al DeCiccio, was finally endorsed by the board. The new version provides for the oversight of the national conference, including remuneration to the hosting regional association. It also separates the offices of secretary and treasurer, which were getting too complicated for a single person to handle. The new secretary will continue to take minutes at board meetings and will also manage the association data base.

NCTE Workshop.
Christina Murphy reported that her workshop "Tutoring and Writing Pedagogy: Philosophies and Paradigms" still has openings. Contact Sandra Gibbs at NCTE (217-328-3870) and enroll in workshop 32.

Writing Center Directory.
Pam Childers is working on the 2nd edition of the Writing Center Directory. Current plans are to publish it on hard-copy and disk through NWCA Press.

NWCA Press.
Writing Center Perspectives, the first book from NWCA Press, was made available at the conference for $10 each. Anyone interested in obtaining a copy should mail $12 (to cover postage and handling) to Christina Murphy, Writing Center, Texas Christian University, Box 32875, Ft. Worth, TX 76129.

The board also discussed the possibility of establishing a permanent press and will entertain a such a proposal at the NCTE meeting this November.

At-Large elections.
Nominations have been received for four At-large and one high school representative to the Executive Board. A ballot will be sent to NWCA members shortly.

Rationale statement and WC consulting.
Jeanne Simpson is working on a rationale statement for writing centers which will include such things as recommendations for funding, staffing, and administering writing centers. Once endorsed by the executive board, this statement can be used to help writing center directors make better cases to their supervisors for adequate funding and working conditions. The statement will also be valuable for writing center consultants to evaluate centers and make specific recommendations on improving them.

NCTE Board meeting.
The Executive Board will meet at NCTE on Saturday, November 18, 1995 from 5:30 to 6:30. All those interested are welcome to attend.

3rd International Writing Centers Conference.
Joan Mullin is interested in receiving proposals for a possible third writing centers conference. If your regional association would like to serve as host, contact Joan soon (419-537-4939). NWCA is an equal opportunity association. Conference sites need not be restricted to states with casino gambling and professional sports.

Byron L. Stay, President
National Writing Centers Association
Mount St. Mary's College
Emmitsburg, MD

Anticipated Job Opening in a Writing Center Spring 1996

Nassau Community College, a multicultural campus serving an increasingly diverse population, enrolls 24,000 students and is located 25 miles from New York City.

Temporary non-classroom faculty member with a commitment to diversity and pluralism is sought for a center serving 250 students per week for Spring/Summer 1996. Possible conversion to tenure track. Option to teach one English course per semester as part of load. Duties include tutoring, administration, and faculty development. Salary: approx. $40,000 annually.

Qualifications:

- M.A. in Composition/Rhetoric, English, or directly related discipline, Ph. D. preferred
- Two years of college teaching experience (Ph.D. will substitute for one year.)
- Two years of experience in a college writing center, working with a wide range of students: ESL, adult, remedial, LD, honors, minority.
- Highly desirable: Training in WAC, ESL, CAI, or LD.

Minorities/Veterans/Physically Challenged/Persons with Disabilities are strongly encouraged to apply.

Applications, postmarked no later than November 27, should be sent to:

Harold Bellinger
Affirmative Action and Diversity Officer
1 Education Drive
Nassau Community College
Garden City, NT 11530-6793
516-572-7747

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Muriel Harris, editor
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