

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E E T T E R

Volume 20, Number 4

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

December, 1995

## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

If your writing center/writing lab/writing room/writing place engages in discussions about what to call your tutors/counselors/consultants/coaches and the students/writers/clients/tutees who come in, I offer a solution accidentally suggested by one of the peer tutors in our Writing Lab, Suzanne Pollert.

Driving back to our campus, after the National Peer Tutoring Conference, we were vigorously rehashing all that we had heard and learned. Suzanne, in what I think of as a burst of creative insight rather than a slip of the tongue, referred to "studors" when talking about students and tutors. So, we offer "studors" to anyone else who would like a term for everyone sitting at the tutoring tables, students and tutors alike. Anyone else have another new term for the rest of us?

As we attempt to cope with all the last-minute, end-of-the-semester frenzy and wind down for the approaching vacation, I wish us all a joyous holiday season, some time for rest and relaxation, and a glorious 1996, filled with happiness, good health, and peace.

Muriel Harris, editor

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## Rhetorical analysis in writing assistant training

During our weekly Writing Center staff meetings we do some of the usual things: practice tutoring techniques, discuss difficult tutoring situations, invite guest speakers, work out housekeeping problems. But increasingly, we have been spending the time on formal training in rhetorical analysis of student texts. They are not lessons in rhetorical theory, but practical sessions in text analysis with some theory thrown in where needed.

Some time ago I came to realize that the Writing Assistants working with me, though all strong writers, did not necessarily know how to think or talk in a systematic way about the structure, development, or writer-reader relationship of longer, more complex student drafts (which typically run 8-12 pages). Most of the WA's are writing, technical communication, and secondary ed majors who have taken advanced courses in writing. They can write long, complex papers without too much trouble—indeed, they write so many it's more like grinding them out—but I have found that they can't always transfer what they learn from their own writing to drafts

written by others. And it is not their need alone; I have the same difficulty. After years of teaching writing I am still learning how to respond to student drafts. It remains the most mysterious, surprising part of my job. But now our staff needs to know more in a more urgent way, as our freshman writing program moves away from personal writing toward an emphasis on writing based on critical reading of sources. Even experienced staff need continuing prac-

tice in rhetorical analysis; therefore, I bring most of these lessons to the Monday meetings when all of us meet together, rather than to the Wednesday-Friday training class. The training class sometimes studies papers the rest of the staff have seen previously.

We start each "rhetoric lesson" by reading a student paper. I discourage quick and easy judgments, though some WA's are eager to give them. I also discourage anyone from diagnosing problems or prescribing tutoring strategies until we have spent some time talking and thinking about the paper. Early judgments, diagnoses, and prescriptions can prevent us from really seeing what the paper is trying to do. Only after some extensive analysis do I permit problems and tutoring strategies to be brought up. By that time we all have a fairly rounded picture of the paper and a better sense of priorities.

I'd like to present a couple of examples to demonstrate how we proceed and how we link the rhetorical analysis to issues of tutoring. The first is an argument paper from second-semester freshman comp. The second is a definition paper from an upper-division nursing course.

The freshman paper was an argument against gun control. We discussed the paper for two consecutive meetings. The writer attempted to show the weakness of gun-control legislation as a way to curb accidental and crime-related shootings, and to propose that education and strong punishment of criminals would be better ways to do so. This focus was reasonably clear, indeed much better than simply arguing that gun control was wrong. But the voice was uneven, ranging from reasonable-sounding to inflammatory. The writer had collected a fairly impressive body of authorities and statistics, though he drew mainly from sources such as *Combat Arms* magazine and Issue Papers from the Independence Institute. Granting him the rather one-sided source material,

we focused on the structure of the argument and the writer-reader relationship.

Drawing on Aristotle and Stephen Toulmin, I pointed out that an argument consists basically of a main claim supported by a number of reasons. I asked the group to do some freewriting and listing to identify the claim and reasons. They had no trouble seeing the claim; the writer at least summed it up well in the closing paragraph. They found the reasons more difficult but eventually came up with ten possible candidates. We identified the paragraphs where the reasons appeared. They turned out to be all over the place, in no logical sequence. Some of the supporting grounds appeared several paragraphs away from the reasons they belonged to. But our hour was up; no time left to sort them out. I closed with a broad hint: ten reasons was too many; study the paper some more and come back next week with about half that.

The next week they reported that it was necessary to take the claim in two parts before we could sort out the reasons. The first part said that gun control is not a good way to prevent deaths; the second said that education and punishment are better ways.

We boiled the reasons down to five, three supporting the claim that gun control is not a good way and one each supporting education and punishment as better ways. We traced through the paper to find the pieces of reason and grounds that needed to be gathered together. We also found supporting material that was not clearly connected to any reason; the writer had not figured out how to bend and shape all his supporting material to the purposes he needed it for. Then we followed the thread of one sample reason to examine how the writer supported it, what grounds he used (evidence, authority, further reasons, etc.) and how he analyzed his grounds. We looked at another reason, the one supporting the claim that punishment is a deterrent, to discover that it was weak because the

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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

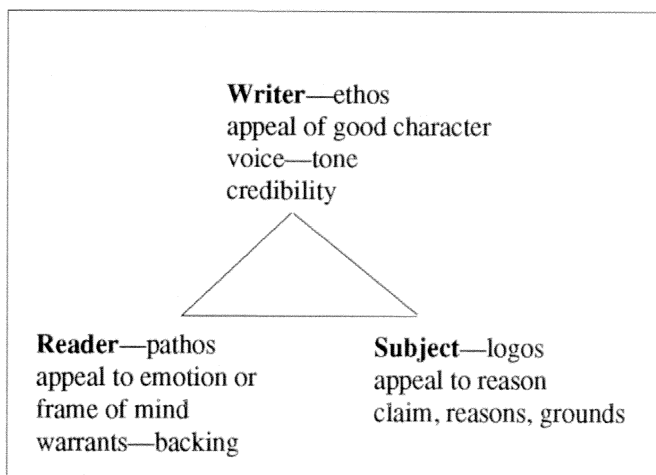
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**Manuscripts:** Recommended length for articles is ten to fifteen double-spaced typed pages, three to five pages for reviews, and four pages for the Tutors' Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. If possible, please send a 3 and 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.

writer had supplied no grounds for it.

At one point someone mentioned that the writer often seemed to have no concept of what audience he was addressing, or what he hoped to accomplish with that audience. That led me to a mini-lecture on what Wayne Booth calls the rhetorical stance. I drew the familiar triangle of rhetorical relationships on the board, to set up a framework for exploring the matter further:



(I hope knowledgeable rhetoricians will forgive my jamming together Booth, Aristotle, and Stephen Toulmin in such an offhanded way, but it did help set up a schema that we found useful. Warrants, in Toulmin's scheme, are the unstated assumptions that the writer may or may not share with the reader. If a warrant is not shared, it needs backing—further reasons and grounds that will hopefully lead the reader to accept the warrant, or at least understand how someone could believe it. For further elucidation of Aristotle's and Toulmin's systems, I recommend the text by John Ramage and John Bean.)

Toward the end of the second hour, it became apparent that we could easily spend another meeting or two on the same paper, but we might get sick of it, and besides, we had other things to do. We wrapped up by talking about questions we would ask the writer. The previous week, upon first reading, the WA's had been inclined to focus on the awkward writing style, the misleading title

(“Gun Control: A Better Solution”), the isolated pockets of illogic. But by the end of our two periods of discussion they were framing questions such as: Who do you see as your audience? To what extent do you expect the paper to change that audience's thinking? What are the main reasons supporting your claim? Where do you state each one?—questions that might lead the writer to a better understanding of his overall purpose and design.

One of the beauties of the gun control paper was that the WA's were unanimously hostile to its claim, as I expected they would be. They had to consider how to help a writer strengthen an argument to which they were opposed—and

which, though generally controlled in tone, had some near-inflammatory stuff in it. At the beginning of our discussion, several of them doubted they could manage to remain neutral. By the end, they saw that by keeping in mind the appeals of Aristotle and the structure of Toulmin, they could indeed manage.

The draft for the nursing course, equally long and complex, conveyed a different rhetorical lesson. It was, as I mentioned, written to a definition assignment in which the writer had to assess the profession of nursing to determine whether it fit the criteria for a true profession. I chose this draft because of its deceptive quality. In contrast to the gun control paper, it seemed to be in a lot more trouble than it really was. The WA's, upon first reading, felt that the draft went all over the place, with no focus or sense of order. I asked them to examine what each paragraph was doing and saying (Bruffee's “descriptive outline” or does-says analysis). They discovered that the draft indeed had a logi-

cal order, starting with the criteria which nursing fit well, moving on to the criteria it did not yet fit but was getting there, and ending with those criteria where it still definitely fell short. Once they understood the organization, they could see the focus.

The writer's problem was not organization, but something much simpler. The writer only needed to announce her purpose and organization early in the draft and supply clear headings and topic statements (often miscalled “transitions”) as she moved from one category to the next. This would involve reordering within some paragraphs, but not reordering at the level of the whole text. However, the problem was severe enough to cause serious confusion for us as readers. If a WA were to approach the draft as essentially disorganized rather than merely lacking in signposts and transitions, the writer might have gone away confused and unable to improve the draft.

The WA who actually worked with this writer got off to a bad start by making precisely that mistake. He assumed there was no organizational plan and started giving her some strategies on how to organize the material. Fortunately, the writer stopped him and explained that she did have an organizational plan and explained what it was. Then they were able to discuss the reasoning behind her plan, and how to make that reasoning accessible to a reader. A writer who was less willing to speak up—and there are quite a few—would not have gotten the session on its proper course. Though this tutoring session was not the disaster it might have been, the WA might have saved considerable time by first trying to understand the development and order that were already there before plunging into talk about organizational strategies—strategies the writer didn't need.

The gun control and nursing papers illustrate two ways in which WAs might be misled by their first impressions of student papers. I believe that rhetorical training is an important way to help them

avoid such mistakes. I don't want to claim it will always prevent us from taking a wrong path in a tutoring session. Our sessions are only 25 minutes long (a recent discussion on WCenter suggests that about half an hour is typical among writing centers). In that time, it is difficult to get an accurate take on a fairly long draft. But I believe repeated training helps. It also helps in sessions when the draft is not read, but WA and writer only talk about the writing. It keeps us in the habit of remembering rhetorical principles and applying them to the writing that comes our way. And, best of all, it reinforces our attempt to master questioning techniques, the most important and challenging aspect of learning to tutor.

Other topics and texts we have studied or will study include the rhetoric of assignment sheets and teachers' comments on papers, style and styles of writing, research papers, and writings of various kinds from across the disciplines. We should never run out of interesting texts for rhetorical analysis.

Richard Leahy  
Boise State University  
Boise, ID

#### Recommended Sources for Rhetorical Analysis

- Anderson, Chris. *Free/Style*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.  
A highly recommended introduction to the "shape of content" (TRIAC), which our writing center uses all the time, as well as a treasury of practical ways to talk about and teach style.
- Booth, Wayne C. "The Rhetorical Stance." *College Composition and Communication* 14 (1963): 139-145.  
An early, but still one of the most persuasive, calls to integrate writer, reader, and subject in writing instruction and writing assignments.

Bruffee, Kenneth. *A Short Course in Writing*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1980.

The original and most extensive source for descriptive outlining (does-says analysis, also demonstrated in Ramage and Bean).

Ramage, John D., and John C. Bean. *Writing Arguments*. 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995.

One of the best of the current crop of textbooks on argument and persuasion, as well as general composition principles; *the* best for making the Toulmin scheme clear and usable as a heuristic.

## Training Program for Developmental Educators

The Kellogg Institute for Training and Certification of Developmental Educators will hold its 1996 Institute from June 28 through July 26, 1996, on the campus of Appalachian State University in Boone, NC.

The 1996 Institute will train faculty, counselors, and administrators from developmental and learning assistance programs in the most current techniques for promoting learning improvement. Institute fees are \$795 plus \$495 for room and board. A graduate credit fee for the three-hour practicum will also be charged. Up to six hours of graduate credit may also be obtained for participation in the summer program.

Applications and additional information about the Institute may be obtained by contacting Elaini Bingham, Director of the Kellogg Institute, or Maggie Mack, Administrative Assistant, National Center for Developmental Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608; 704-262-3057. Application deadline is March 15, 1996.

## 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).

# A pictogram of writing center conference follow-up

How and why do the staff of writing centers write reports or narratives following a tutorial? To whom is the report addressed? How is the information used that is contained in the report? Is there a relationship between the size of the college or the number of writing center visits and the decision to provide a follow-up report? What does this written report look like?

Our survey on written writing center conference follow-up resulted from a friendly debate about the audience of the follow-up report. Each of us directs a writing center in a small rural college; St. Lawrence University is a liberal arts college, and Clarkson University is dominated by engineering. As in many other schools, we use written conference follow-up to record the conferences' content in order for someone to build on that work. With the student's permission, the written report at St. Lawrence went to faculty, but the written follow-up at Clarkson was sent to the student with a copy to the related professor if the student agreed. At both schools, a copy was also kept on file in the center. Although we valued the usefulness of written conference follow-up, our hierarchies of follow-up readers differed, and so the debate continued.

In spring of 1993, we began to speculate about what other writing centers do for writing conference follow-up and to develop a survey. Interestingly, a few months later, various voices on the WCenter (an electronic forum for writing center specialists) debated the necessity, usefulness, and ethics of following up a writing center conference. The range of voices included Molly Wingate's comment, "If a faculty mem-

ber wants the kind of control over the writing center that getting reports implies, then that person should go hire a teaching assistant" to Joan Mullin's comment that "Our reports have drawn faculty to the center in many ways—they call to give us compliments, ask how we succeeded—it's pretty positive."

Our survey of writing center conference follow-up was mailed in August 1993. Our purpose was not to argue Eric Crump's questions of student confidentiality, relationships with faculty, or the political complications of conference follow-up (2: 8-9; 3: 6-7). Our chief goal was to discover the uses and patterns of writing center conference follow-up across the country.

We sent this survey to 484 institutions listed in the Association of Writing Program's Official Guide to Writing Programs and the National Directory of Writing Centers and received 171 surveys (of which 163 were applicable) from public and private, 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities. With the help of a Clarkson University management information systems major, we entered the data in Paradox for Windows 3.1.

## Results

### Why do writing centers not follow up conferences?

Before reporting reasons cited for following up conferences, we present the rationales given by some of the 35% of centers that do not follow up conferences with some sort of written report.

The reasons for no written follow-up ranged from logistical to philosophical with most centering on resources. We

heard from under-supported or extremely busy tutoring systems as well as from writing center directors advocating student independence from faculty or reacting to perceived faculty indifference: "We are a part-time Center with no director or coordinator"; "Such reports diminish students' sense of self-direction and authority"; and "We stopped sending notices to faculty to save money and because few faculty expressed interest." Time, money, and staff were the most frequent reasons cited for not following up conferences. In addition, comments like "a lack of staff to do such administrative tasks" and "We believe our staff time is better used in conferencing" suggest follow-up is thought to be not only a drain on resources but also pointless paperwork.

The second most common reason given for not following up was the desire to protect students' privacy and encourage independence. "Reports to whom ever would violate a student's right to privacy." "We don't want to appear to be tracing them (students)." Faculty indifference was almost as frequent a reason for no written follow-up as maintaining student confidentiality. The survey comments from those who do not use any written follow-up create an interesting picture because writing center people cite conflicting reasons: lack of faculty interest and faculty interference with writing center operations. So, some centers not following up say that faculty are aloof from center operations while others wish to avoid faculty contact.

### Who does written follow-up?

A 65% majority (104/163) of centers responding use written conference follow-up. Private and 4-year schools have

a higher percentage of follow-up than public or 2-year schools. We find written follow-up decreases as the enrollment increases: 73% of small schools (undergraduate enrollment under 5,000); 67% of mid-size (5,000 to 10,000 undergraduate enrollment); and only 54% of the schools with over 10,000 enrollment conduct written follow-up. It is not clear if the number of visits impacts the decision to follow up conferences. 43% of centers with 500 and fewer visits follow up; 66% of writing centers with 2,000 to 2,500 visits use follow up; and 46% of those with over 4,000 visits do follow up.

### **To whom is the follow-up addressed?**

The data about who receives written conference follow-up show us that there is a strong relationship between the faculty and writing centers, although we don't know if the connection is collaborative. In fact, 91 of the 104 centers which generate follow-up reports send them to faculty. Almost half of these centers send follow-up ONLY to faculty and to no one else, including the writing center staff. After faculty, the writing center staff (this could include tutors and directors) is the next most frequent recipient of writing conference follow-up reports. Of 104 centers 61 write follow-up for center staff. Of all writing centers using follow-up, less than 6% keep it exclusively in the center. Lastly, only 19 of the 104 schools that provide written follow-up directly address the student writer or include the student in the conference follow-up process.

### **What format does the written follow-up take?**

Most writing centers (65%) use an individualized letter or narrative to follow up conferences. Next in frequency is a combination of checklist and brief summary. The checklist format is third, with one survey respondent wryly noting the checklist is "antithetical to the message we are trying to send out." A numerical report or form letter is used by less than 20%. Overwhelmingly, tutors write the follow-ups. A few are written by the center visitor and tutor.

Respondents returned a wide variety of sample forms with their survey. The samples include sign-in sheets, report forms with check-off sections about the assignment and areas of concern, forms that are filled out jointly by tutor and writer, as well as pre-conference forms ("a guide for both the student and the tutor. . . a way of forcing the student to think about the paper") that are completed by the writer before the tutoring session begins and complemented by a post-conference form written by the tutor. Many forms go beyond a product critique to a narrative of both the writer's process and the product.

### **Can confidentiality be maintained?**

Student confidentiality is widely assured. Of those generating written follow-up, 71% allow students to choose to keep the information confidential. If we assume that the centers with no follow-up, by definition, keep students' work confidential, then those working in over 85% of the writing centers we contacted preserve student confidentiality. However, comments indicate that, in some schools, the right to confidentiality is foregone if a student is required by faculty to use the center. In these cases, faculty have access to the report because the writing center visit fulfills a class requirement.

### **How do writing centers use written follow-up?**

Of those who use follow-up, many indicated multiple uses of the information. Of those who send summaries 100% indicate the information in the written follow-up is used for administrative purposes like record keeping or reports to faculty advisers and to institutional administrators. Follow-up also provides a record should questions arise about the writer's work in the center. The report is used by 92% for the public relations purpose of "meeting faculty needs" and informing faculty of students writing center work. Administrators say that this report keeps the faculty up-to-date on the student's work. Some centers send a monthly or annual report form to faculty whose students use the center.

In addition to administrative uses and public relations, 82% of those writing reports indicate that information can be used to reinforce the content of the conference, whether to the faculty, writing center staff, or the writer. The report "provide(s) a record should questions arise about a student's use of the Center or a tutor's advice." Another 43% indicate that they use this report to help them in research and planning to meet the needs of clientele. Since many written reports include particulars such as the time and length of the tutorial as well as a checklist of areas of concern, writing center administrators may use this information to schedule tutors during peak user times or prepare tutor-training by identifying recurring student writing concerns.

Evaluating conference effectiveness is also a use of written follow-up 43% of the time. Sometimes this "conference effectiveness" means that the director may use the report as part of an evaluation of a tutor. In addition, other survey comments indicate that the contents of the summaries or reports are used in weekly tutor meetings and that meaningful and rich discussions often result. Another indicates that follow-up information is used to "inform instructors of problem areas for a given student." These reports are also used as a reference for the next tutoring session with the same writer "to keep track of what goes on during each consultation, to assure continuity, record special instructions, etc.," providing continuity from session to session. Respondents indicate that the report works well to refresh the tutor's memory of progress of the paper; also, if a writer doesn't see the same tutor twice, "the record provides needed background for conference discussion," thus acting as a vehicle for tutor communication.

## Summary

A majority of writing centers (65%) do follow-up conferences by sharing a written description or summary of the tutorial; most centers direct written follow-up to faculty and writing center staff,

few to students. We see that the majority of writing centers communicate with faculty outside the centers only with student consent, as 85% of students working in writing centers can maintain their privacy. Some centers do not provide follow-up because their resources are strained; because the writing centers want autonomy for themselves and their students; or because they believe faculty express no interest.

## Conclusions

When we began, we wanted to know patterns of use and rationale of written writing center conference follow-up. We now have broad outlines of the various pictures, and these structures suggest relationships between writing centers and students, faculty and, in a sense, the home institution. Along the way, we found that the decision to distribute written follow-up is not dependent on maintaining confidentiality, as centers solve the dilemma by allowing students to choose whether or not the follow-up is confidential.

The different relationships between writing centers and faculty range from integrated to isolated. Most centers send written follow-up to faculty. Some centers include students, faculty and staff in the follow-up triad. A few, in the cause of student empowerment, exclude faculty from the conferencing loop. "We encourage students to come on their own and discourage faculty members from requiring their students to come to us. We are a center for writers and have no desire to become involved in a rather high-schoolish reporting system." Other writing centers try to balance or control the professor-writer-writing center relationship. One respondent said, "If the faculty have concerns . . . they can communicate with us and we will deal with them in the conference."

It seems ironic to us, that in an effort to assist the student, the student is left out. They are rarely addressed in their own conference follow-up. (We suspect that respondents assumed that the written fol-

low-up reports filed in the centers are open to the students, but our information doesn't reflect whether students access them.) Could this follow-up loop indirectly imply that the students are not responsible for their own writing, but that this responsibility is shared between writing center staff and faculty? The low percentage of student involvement may also indicate a narrow view of follow-up as a report card to an "outsider" rather than a part of the student's learning.

Although time and reflection may result in a different picture of written writing center conference follow-up, our survey shows that writing centers are integrated in the home institution; that the majority of writing centers do follow up writing conferences; that most of those who don't would if resources allowed; and that most written follow-up is sent primarily to faculty. Our original debate about the audience of written follow-up is over. We are convinced that faculty AND students should be included as readers. The writing center, faculty, and student can then form a triad to support writing.

## Future work

Future work should ask significant questions such as whether follow-up is a requirement imposed by others outside of the center; whether directors and the authors of follow-up share an understanding of the purposes and format; and how and if centers would change what they presently do to follow up their conferences. We also would like to know how the author of the follow-up (peer tutor, TA, paraprofessional, faculty) affects the nature of the follow-up. Furthermore, is there a writing center discourse that can effectively communicate with multiple audiences?

Since the majority of writing centers use conference follow-up, we want to know if it is an effective device for continuing a writer's education: is it worth the time and resources to "help" writers in this way when they are rarely included in the follow-up? Most importantly, can

follow-up help the center achieve its mission within the institution?

Anneke J. Larrance  
St. Lawrence University  
Canton, NY  
and  
Barbara Brady  
Clarkson University  
Potsdam, NY

### Works Cited

- Crump, Eric. "Voices from the Net, Sharing Records: Student Confidentiality and Faculty Relations." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 18.2 (1993): 8-9.
- . "Voices from the Net, Sharing Records, Part II: Political Considerations." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 18.3 (1993): 6-7.
- Mullin, Joan. "Re: Student Descriptions of Consultations." *WCenter* July 8, 1993: 13:45 EDT.
- Wingate, Molly. "Re: Reports to Teachers." *WCenter* July 8, 1993: 13:00 EDT.

### East Central Writing Centers Association: New deadline for submitting conference proposals

The East Central Writing Centers Association conference will be held March 1-2. Proposals for interactive presentations and workshops on the topic of the the writing center as meeting ground are especially welcome, but proposals on other topics will also be considered.

The Call for Proposals in the November issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* listed January 31 as a deadline for submitting proposals. Please note that the deadline has been changed to January 15, 1996.

## New learning assistance journal

The Midwest College Learning Center Association announces a new journal, *The Learning Assistance Review*. The first issue will be published in the Spring of 1996. We are seeking submissions for that issue (due December 1) and for subsequent issues.

*The Learning Assistance Review* aims to publish scholarly articles and reviews that address issues of interest to a broad range of learning center, writing center, and reading center professionals. Primary consideration will be given to articles about program design and evaluation, classroom based research, the application of theory and research to practice, innovative teaching strategies,

student assessment, tutoring, and other topics that bridge gaps in our knowledge about the postsecondary learner. The audience includes learning, reading, writing center administrators, teaching staff and tutors, as well as other faculty and administrators across the curriculum who are interested in improving the learning of post-secondary students.

If you would like to receive the Guidelines for Submission or more information about the journal, please contact Dr. Martha Casazza at National Louis University at 312-621-9650, ext.3273 or [mcas@whe2.nl.edu](mailto:mcas@whe2.nl.edu).

## Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference

If you are interested in attending the Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference, "Crossing Boundaries: Peer Tutoring Possibilities," at Brigham Young University on March 1 and 2, 1996, please contact Deirdre Paulsen at 122 HGB Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah 84602 (801-378-7844). E-mail: [dmpaulse@adm1.byu.edu](mailto:dmpaulse@adm1.byu.edu). Call for proposals for fifty minute presentations by peer tutors.

Deadline: January 15.

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## Writing and Communication Center Position: East Tennessee State University

East Tennessee State University announces an opening in the Office of Academic Affairs:

**POSITION AVAILABLE:** Director of Writing and Communication Center. Staff position; 12-month appointment.

**EFFECTIVE DATE:** July 1, 1996 or as soon thereafter as possible.

**RESPONSIBILITIES:** Administer newly created center which will offer students tutoring in writing and oral communication, in conjunction with the university's across-the-curriculum programs in these areas. Hire, train and supervise center personnel, including secretary and undergraduate and graduate student workers. Propose purchase of equipment needed to accomplish the center's goals. Propose and oversee center budget. Assess the center's effectiveness. As other duties permit, tutor students in written and oral communication. Report to the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs.

**QUALIFICATIONS:** Master's degree in English, communication or related field required; doctorate desirable. Knowledge of and commitment to both writing and oral communication pedagogy required. Strong supervisory and organizational skills required; experience administering a university

writing or oral communication center desirable. Ability to establish positive working relations with students, faculty and staff essential. Working knowledge of personal computers, video equipment, and other technology supporting writing and oral communication desirable.

**APPLICATION DEADLINE:** The position is open until filled. Candidates whose applications are complete by March 1, 1996 are assured of full consideration.

**APPLICATION:** Complete applications will include a formal letter of application, vita, and the names, telephone numbers, and addresses of three references. Applicants are encouraged to submit evidence of teaching effectiveness or other relevant supporting materials. Send application material to:  
Drs. William Kirkwood and Kevin O'Donnell  
Co-chairs, Search Committee  
Office of Academic Affairs  
Box 70,733, ETSU  
Johnson City, Tennessee 37614-0733  
FAX 423-9929-5800

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# TUTORS' COLUMN

## Manami and me

She sat alone at a table in front of me. When our eyes met, she flashed an uncertain smile, then quickly lowered her head.

"Are you waiting for a tutor?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, her dark eyes peeking through shiny, black bangs.

"What are you writing about?" I asked.

"My home country," she said as she pushed her paper toward me. I glanced at the name in the top corner—Manami.

As Manami read her essay aloud, I knew we were in for a difficult session. Her sentences were so confusing that I couldn't understand the first paragraph. She omitted articles and prepositions. She switched from past to present tense. Her sentences were fragmented, and some of her word choices were inappropriate. I took a deep breath and read the first sentence: "I moved as I was ten years old."

"What other word besides *as* could you use in that sentence?" I asked. Seeming puzzled, she propped her palm against her temple.

"I can't use *as*?" she asked.

"*When* is more appropriate," I said. "It introduces a point in time."

"What is difference between *when* and *as*?" she asked.

"That's a good question," I thought. "How am I going to explain this?"

Explaining errors is, for me, the most challenging part of tutoring. And students who are learning English as a sec-

ond language (ESL) are the most difficult to tutor. Yet, I find myself drawn to ESL students like Manami from Japan. I enjoy working with them because they are so eager to learn. I admire them because they have many obstacles to overcome and yet they persevere.

Moving to a new country and learning a difficult language requires a tremendous adjustment. And even native English speakers find the college environment an uncertain place. I was overwhelmed with anxiety my first day on campus. ESL students must adapt to college life in spite of cultural differences and a language barrier. That surely takes courage.

Tutoring also takes courage. When I was asked to tutor in the Writing Lab at Harrisburg Area Community College, I felt unqualified for the position. I didn't see myself as an "English expert," and I worried that my knowledge was not good enough. "What if a student asks me a question I can't answer? . . . What if I must read an essay about an unfamiliar subject?" Doubts and fears plagued my mind.

Then I thought about all the other times I had been afraid to do something—afraid to open my own business, afraid to be a mother, afraid to start college at 30. Each time I had moved through my fear, and I was rewarded for it. Tutoring would probably be another rewarding experience if I could just get past the fear.

Fear is undoubtedly the greatest destroyer of one's growth. It prevents us from reaching our potential. If we want to learn and reach full bloom, we must move ahead in spite of our fears.

I decided to move ahead and go through with my tutor training. The class consisted of seven creative and caring students with whom I quickly became friends. I looked forward to English 113 for tutors, even though I had a tough instructor. He expected the very best work from each one of us because he cares about the Writing Lab and the students who use it.

I believe caring is the most important quality of a teacher. And although tutors are not teachers, they also must have a caring attitude in order to be effective. Foreign students such as Manami need more than an English expert, they need encouragement and individual attention.

Several months after our first session, I tutored Manami again. When I sat beside her, I noticed something different. She held her head slightly higher, and she made eye contact with me as she explained her assignment. She appeared to be making peace with her new environment.

Perhaps I enjoy working with ESL students because I can relate to their struggles. I have felt the need for encouragement many times, and I wrestle with anxiety each time I face an unfamiliar task. Life is filled with uncertainties, but whenever I meet someone who encourages me and shows genuine concern, the struggles become more manageable, and I become more confident and determined. That is what I hope to do for each student I tutor. Caring and encouragement are great motivators.

Danelle Leitzel  
Harrisburg Area Community College  
Harrisburg, PA

# The invisible couch in the tutoring of writing

My first Writing Center director once warned me, “No matter how prepared you think you are, learn to expect the unexpected.” I’ve always taken this as sound advice, but along the way I have often overlooked some of the roles I may be called upon to perform in the Writing Center. The role of counselor in particular is one that deserves far more consideration. The literature on tutoring has long dealt with why tutors have to be counselors, but how to effectively incorporate this role into our everyday tutoring has not been so clear.

In a recent discussion in my tutor training seminar, I asked students to think about the different roles they believed they would play as beginning tutors in the Writing Center. They quickly jumped on the more obvious—editor, responder, coach, critic, listener, etc. Their responses confirmed for me what Geoffrey Chase addresses in his article, “Problem-Solving in the Writing Center: From Theory to Practice”: we are demanding of our tutors. Chase offers a detailed account of the specific demands we place on them:

We want them to respond to many students from a variety of disciplines, working on a variety of assignments for teachers and instructors who have wildly different demands and expectations. We want them to help students become more aware of their own writing processes. We want them to diagnose and suggest strategies rather than to edit and to proofread. We want them to treat writing as a mode of inquiry. And we want them to do all of this very quickly. (29)

As we discussed Chase’s article and the multiple tasks involved with tutoring,

one student spoke up and argued that tutoring from this perspective only addressed a student’s writing and not the whole student. He posed the question: “What happens if a personal problem or crisis surfaces during a session?” Another student responded, “Send them to Academic Counseling; it’s not our place to deal with people’s personal problems.” Having tutored students at virtually every level for several years, I tended to agree with this response. I never believed myself qualified to address the loss of loved ones, suicide attempts, or past (even present) abuses. Nor did I believe I should counsel students who felt they were mistreated academically, either by instructors or by fellow classmates. I was supposed to help students become better writers.

In fact, I had read dozens of articles that supported my belief. In “What the College Writing Center Is—and Isn’t,” Richard Leahy says it best. He notes that the Writing Center is “a place where people get together, usually one-to-one, and talk about writing” (43). This sounds to me like a clear, albeit generic, statement of purpose for any writing center. However, a deeper part of me has come to believe that it *is* our obligation to provide at least some form of counseling if the situation presents itself. In fact, the need for us to engage in on-the-spot counseling often becomes inevitable.

For example, a young man came to me with a paper he had written for his composition instructor. He needed help revising. The paper was given a C- and came to me without instructor comments. I was apprehensive because I usually had an assignment sheet or comments from the instructor to help me guide the session. I had neither but de-

cidated to read the paper anyway to see if there was some way I could help.

I had barely finished reading the introduction when I glanced up and realized this student was crying. A breakdown so serious that I could no longer function as this young man’s tutor had just occurred. My initial reaction was internal. Remembering a famous quote by the doctor to the captain from the *Star Trek* series, I thought, “Dammit Jim, I’m a tutor not a doctor!” This helped ease the mounting tension inside me, but it did little to resolve the situation at hand. My impulse was to get up and leave. So I did.

Moments later, I returned with a tissue and an alternate game plan. I remember offering words of encouragement while at the same time silently cursing my tutor trainer for not preparing me for such an emotional situation.

The student eventually met with his instructor to work out their differences. Looking back, though, I realize that we do at times transcend our roles as tutors, trained to help students with their writing. Issues in tutoring do arise that are more immediate than developing a clear thesis or suggesting improvements writers can make in their papers. Too often we forget that attached to every paper is a real person, complete with fears, anxieties and desires to perform well in the university. While most students react less dramatically than the young man who broke down in front of me, students often come to us distressed about issues other than their immediate performances as writers. The very writing they bring us, though, often illustrates their lives quite clearly. Their writing may actually provide insight into their problems, and in some cases what we read may actually be a cry for help.

Tutors can learn a great deal about a person through her writing, and what we learn may actually help if a crisis situation arises. Our insight may also help us to better expect the unexpected and develop strategies in advance. In a recent *Writing Lab Newsletter* article, John Parbst suggests that "it is always good to have a prescribed 'plan for control' ready to spring for any awkward tutoring moments" (5). Although Parbst does not address crisis situations in his article, I agree with his suggestion. And what we learn from students and their writing could very well be a part of such a "plan for control."

I have also found several occasions where competition between students has forced me into the precarious tutor-as-counselor role. Jackie, for example, a student I tutored on a weekly basis, came to me one day completely hysterical. She had written a personal narrative about her favorite subject, horses. She brought the paper to class that day for a peer response. What follows is the actual written response given her by a fellow writer:

Horses and Horse Racing never appealed to me. It seems like a bland activity called a sport. This story reinforced these feelings and even magnified them. I really didn't see where this story was going until the very end when it was too late to salvage. I don't think this story succse (sic) succedes (sic).

Similes and metaphors are practically nonexistent, so it is basically a straight, no frills kind of story. I don't want to deem this paper as "BIRD CAGE MATERIAL" or anything, but I looked again and again and really couldnt (sic) find anything in this story that interested me. The spelling was poor and mechanics average at best.

I read every paper with an open mind, and I like most papers, but this one lacked any pizzaz (sic) or

attention getting qualities that can make a story into an epic. I have no interest in this subject, so I have absolutely no questions about any vague areas.

I, too, was upset by the response. It took weeks of encouragement from me and from her instructor to convince the student that her writing was better than her peer had so needlessly indicated. It has taken even longer for me to consciously see that I automatically slip into the role of counselor when the need arises.

This example has since become an important part of my tutor training course. I use it in a role-playing situation, where new tutors must decide quickly, almost immediately, how to respond to a student who comes to the center under these or similar circumstances. The lesson eventually leads into discussions related to making a "plan for control," and the need for appropriate tutor feedback. Such on-the-spot planning, though not directly related to the student's writing, may actually heighten a tutor's sense of what should be the most *immediate* focus in a session, a lesson that does transfer directly to the problem-solving strategies addressed in writing. The point here is that tutors *are* counselors and must be prepared to tackle difficult situations that may arise. This sometimes forgotten role should be addressed and openly discussed in tutor training seminars and during writing center staff meetings.

It is not enough, however, that we identify and examine this under-emphasized tutor role. If we are serious about helping students who come to the writing center, then it is our obligation to offer our tutors problem-solving strategies that not only address writing, but strategies that address emergency counseling situations. Problem solving is seldom represented in a neat, linear fashion. And students who come to us from any field can "relate to problem-solving when it is removed, at least temporarily, from the realm of composition" (Chase 31). While most problem-solving strate-

gies are specific to the tutoring of writing, they also speak directly to problems that transcend the "realm of composition." If such a plan helps tutors move writers through writing problems, then it may also become good advice for working through the kinds of problems not immediately evident in a student's paper, the unwritten problems that detract from successful tutoring sessions.

Perhaps the first step in aiding students through crisis situations is to help them understand and accept the problem. If students take their problems seriously, then our chances of helping effectively solve problems will increase. The tutoring session I illustrated at the beginning of this paper is a good example. In that particular session it was obvious by the student's reaction that he was serious about the problem. Students don't normally lose their composure in front of an unfamiliar person if they haven't given the issue some serious thought, as I was convinced my student had done. The responsibility of accepting the situation, though, was mine too, since I would be the one talking him through it. Had I not taken him seriously, he may never have addressed the issue at all.

My instinct then was one born out of my ability to effectively tutor writing problems. I asked specific questions which led him back into the text (the problem) where he could more thoroughly analyze it. The idea is to get the student to see the scope of the conflict more clearly and to understand the events that make it up. It was my responsibility to ask thought-provoking questions, as opposed to those which generate little more than yes/no answers. This open-ended question asking will generally lead students to ask questions of and for themselves. The technique is important in any problem-solving process because once the student has been able to analyze the problem, she can define it more clearly for herself. Initially, the student in my tutoring session articulated the problem as one where the instructor did not like him and so gave him low grades. After a brief analysis, he de-

defined the problem more clearly for himself: "My instructor is giving me low grades with no reasons and no comments to improve the next paper. What am I supposed to do?"

Once he had adequately defined the problem, we were able to discuss the possible choices that would help solve the problem. My first question was: "What are your options?" First, he considered several ways in which he might approach the issue with his instructor. Then he chose the best option and confronted him. My role here was to guide him through the decision-making process and offer my own suggestions on how he might effectively solve the problem. The ultimate decision, of course, was his to make.

A week or two later, I met with the same student for another tutoring session. Before beginning, we discussed the outcome of the confrontation with the instructor. Though we didn't actually evaluate how the problem was solved, the student was satisfied with the instructor's response to his concerns.

I don't mean to suggest here that we should require tutors to follow rigid guidelines whenever a conflict arises. We have enough to think about in helping students improve themselves as writers without becoming full time counselors as well. Operating with an awareness that problems not directly related to writing may be addressed in this manner will at least give tutors a plan for control when situations present themselves.

It is also important to understand that we are not, nor should we be in the business of routinely conducting therapy sessions. While I find it essential to answer a student's cry for help, our ultimate mission and focus remains *writing centered*. We need to advise tutors that counseling long term personal and emotional problems is beyond the scope of our operations. Most universities offer services equipped to accommodate student needs that we cannot, and it is entirely appropriate to make referrals when problems arise.

For our part, we must acknowledge that on-the-spot counseling is sometimes inevitable. And while I don't think it necessary to install crisis hotlines in our writing centers, a little preparation can make all the difference in how effectively we fulfill our roles. Our commitment to effective tutoring will only be strengthened by acknowledging and acting upon that realization.

Robert W. Barnett  
University of Michigan—Flint  
Flint, MI

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## National Writing Centers Association Membership and Publications

The National Writing Centers Association has two publications, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and the *Writing Center Journal*. If your subscription to the *Writing Lab Newsletter* is part of your membership in the National Writing Centers Association, then you also receive the *Writing Center Journal*. If you are not an NWCA member, you may want to consider joining. Dues are \$35/year, which includes U.S. subscriptions to both the *WLN* (\$15) and *WCJ* (\$10). (Rates for sending the publications outside the U.S. are higher.) Send a \$35 check (for membership and both journals), made payable to NWCA, to Alan Jackson, DeKalb College, 2101 Womack Road, Dunwoody, GA 30338

The *Writing Center Journal* is a refereed journal that publishes articles on writing center theory, research, and practice. It is published twice a year, in the spring and the fall. Subscription to the *WCJ* only is \$10/year (\$15 for Canadian and overseas subscribers). Send subscriptions and submissions to Dave Healy, Editor, *Writing Center Journal*, General College, University of Minnesota, 128 Pleasant St. S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455-0434

For a subscription only to the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, please see the information in the box on page 2.

## Writing Center Position: Clarke College

Clarke College, a Catholic liberal arts college in Dubuque, Iowa, seeks qualified candidates to fill the following permanent, full-time position: 1/2 time teaching as co-director of the college's Writing Center and 1/2 time teaching in the college's five-member English Department. Candidates should possess at least a master's degree in writing or literature. ABDs, Ph.D., and MFAs preferred. Candidates should have experience teaching in a writing center, training tutors, and working with faculty in Writing Across the Curriculum. Members of the

English Department regularly teach writing classes in a computer-mediated, Power PC Macintosh-based classroom. Responsibilities begin with the 1996-97 academic year. Evaluation of candidates begins immediately and continues until the position is filled. Send a cover letter, a current cv/resume, copies of academic credentials, 3 letters of recommendation, and the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of 3 references to Katherine Fischer, Writing Center Director, Box 1569, Clarke College, Dubuque IA 52001-3198. AA/EOE.

# WRITING CENTER ETHICS

## Walls

Last month I talked about differences between the “sharers” and the “seclusionists” in writing centers, “sharers” being those who believe it is ethically acceptable to share tutorial information with faculty members and “seclusionists” being those who believe that tutorial conferences should remain private and confidential. This month I want to talk about a somewhat tangential but nevertheless related issue: whether or not writing centers—as physical spaces—should be similarly “open” or “closed.”

Open writing centers are characterized by the absence of walls between conference areas, and tables where students and tutors can meet in full view of others both inside and outside the center. In closed writing centers, tutors generally meet with students in cubicles or carrels where conversations can take place behind partitions and in private. Advocates of both types of center tend to be rather forceful in their expressions of preference, and they each offer compelling rationales for why one arrangement is better, or at least preferable, to the other. On this level, at least, we can say the controversy is an ethical one, tied as it is to assessments of relative pedagogical utility and value.

But value judgments are inevitably tied to personal standards, and the nature of those standards will vary from person to person, tutor to tutor, writing center director to writing center director. What is the most important benefit to be derived from room arrangements? Is it comfort? Quiet? Community? Privacy? What effects are these arrangements likely to have on student writing or on the quality of tutoring? Should we be

thinking about short-term concrete goals when we consider how room arrangements will affect tutor-student interactions, or should long-term abstract goals be weighed more heavily? Should we be concerned about meeting the needs of all students and all learning styles and all preferences in tutorial sessions? Or should we accept the fact that no writing center can be all things to all people and settle upon one room arrangement as “the best solution for the most people?” And how do we determine whether the benefits we *want* are the ones we’re actually getting? I expect that different people in different institutions will have different—and equally rational—answers to all of these questions, but I also expect that personal preferences and individual pedagogical philosophies will shape our stances to a great extent.

Take my own case, for example. I can’t help but think about open vs. closed writing centers except in light of my own behaviors as a writer, and for that reason my opinions are probably biased by my own habits, preferences, quirks, and proclivities for getting writing done. When I write—when I think about and talk about and do my writing—I generally work better when I can reduce the number of distractions I have to cope with. I tend to focus better when it’s quiet or when I can pay attention to one conversation at a time. Writing, in my case at least, requires concentration, demands attentional focus, and forces me to follow sometimes convoluted mental paths and make rather dramatic leaps of logic. These mental activities are a lot harder to accomplish when there are other people nearby engaged in tantalizing conversations or when the general buzz of activity that surrounds the writ-

ing center deflects my attention and captures my interest every twenty or thirty seconds or so. I’m not saying it’s impossible to work in such circumstances (hey, I’ve written papers on airplanes and in noisy playgrounds), and I’m not saying that the papers that emerge from open writing centers are qualitatively worse than those which come out of writing centers with more private spaces. I’m just saying that my belief, filtered through my own sensibilities, is that many writers will find the working environment of open writing centers distracting and inefficient.

Further, as I listen to the arguments about tearing down walls and having conferences with students at big tables in large open spaces (well, large for writing centers, that is), what I tend to hear is abstract theoretical discourse about the need to *modify attitudes about the writing center*, not necessarily to help students improve their writing, and that grates on me—perhaps a little more than it should. Openness advocates frequently express their desire “to give students a sense of community with other writers engaged in similar writing projects,” to “show students that they are not alone in their struggles with the conventions of written text,” and to “help students and faculty see that many people—at many levels of ability—use the writing center” and thereby lessen the stigma of remediation that is so often attached to the center’s activities. Though this openness may provide some useful affective benefits for student writers, and I certainly wouldn’t deny that such benefits are important, I can’t help but wonder whether this “let’s-let-everyone-see-what-we’re-doing” stance is more heavily invested in a writing

center's administrative and status goals than in the writing-related needs of the students it works with.

Now, I do have strong sympathies for the behavioral-change agenda. I can certainly see the point of demystifying the center, and I can appreciate the long-term benefits that might result from showing students that the writing center is not a scary or threatening place. But I also have to say that I'd feel more comfortable if I heard more talk about *how* an open center actually helps student writing and how it addresses the needs of students who aren't particularly thrilled with having to talk about their writing in full view of the rest of the world.

That's pretty much my take on the issue, but even so, I recognize that there are probably a lot of students who would welcome more open spaces for writing conferences and who would prefer working in such an environment to being boxed up for an hour in a confining, sterile cubicle with only a Webster's and a Roget's to provide any distractions. I must admit that I really like the idea—in principle—of being able to kick back on a comfy couch, put my feet up on a table, and toss around ideas for a paper with a tutor. That sounds like a great writing environment to me, particularly at early stages of the writing process. Comfortable surroundings can go a long way toward reducing writing anxiety and getting the old creative juices flowing. So, even as I tend to prefer a closed writing center overall, I can certainly understand the attraction of open centers.

Interestingly, this discussion puts me in mind of a study Gail Hawisher and I conducted several years ago regarding the "optimal" ergonomic arrangement for computer-mediated classrooms. We polled the editorial board of the journal *Computers and Composition* about what type of classroom layout they preferred, and we got exactly the same type of divided response that I find among writing center people over "open" or "closed" spaces. About half the people we polled preferred to have computers lined up

along the walls of the classroom for easier instructor mobility, better eye-contact with students, and simpler wiring), and about half preferred to have computers clustered into "pods" (for easier student collaboration, an enhanced sense of privacy, and better use of space). As Gail and I thought about how to explain these findings, we concluded two things: (1) different people ascribed to different pedagogies and they often used different classroom arrangements to implement them more effectively, and (2) sometimes people were stuck with room arrangements they inherited through no choice (or fault) of their own, and they justified the pre-existing condition in the best way they knew how.

The same may be true for open vs. closed writing centers. Preferences for one type of working space over another may be expressions of different pedagogical philosophies, each with its own set of strengths, and each with its own set of drawbacks. Or, on the other hand, they could just be a matter of architectural and financial realism. If we have relatively little choice about how our rooms are arranged, we may tend to focus on the benefits of the arrangements rather than dwell on the shortcomings.

Michael A. Pemberton  
*University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*

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## South Central Writing Centers Association: Extended deadline for submitting conference proposals

The deadline for submission of proposals for the 1996 SCWCA conference in Austin, Feb. 29-March 2, has been extended to December 15. For further information, contact Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, Undergraduate Writing Center, FAC 211, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712 (512-471-6222). [epiedmontmarton@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:epiedmontmarton@mail.utexas.edu)

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## WCenter: Electronic discussion group

WCenter is an electronic forum for writing center specialists hosted by Texas Tech University. The forum was started in 1991 by Lady Falls Brown, writing center director and list manager.

To subscribe:  
send to:[listproc@unicorn.acs.ttu.edu](mailto:listproc@unicorn.acs.ttu.edu)

no subject line

message: subscribe wcenter <your name>

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## WRIT-C: Electronic discussion group

Dave Healy, at the University of Minnesota, is the list manager for WRIT-C, a discussion group especially for tutors/consultants/coaches and is an open list for anyone to subscribe.

To subscribe:  
send to: [listserv@vm1.spcs.umn.edu](mailto:listserv@vm1.spcs.umn.edu)

no subject line

message: subscribe writ-c <your name>

# “T.E.A.C.H.”: Five steps to applying the humanistic approach to tutoring

Ever since I began working as a professional tutor at the writing lab at Brookdale Community College, I felt that the warm, comfortable environment created by the staff's accepting attitude towards students must be a major reason for its success. It wasn't until I was taking a graduate course in psychology that I learned this personal, caring approach was found to be most effective in teaching by the humanistic psychologists of the sixties and early seventies such as Carl Rogers, Arthur Combs, and William Glasser. They proposed that students, just as their patients, need to feel accepted and respected. They discovered that only in a warm, nonthreatening environment, where students are given opportunity to make decisions in their learning, will learners assert themselves and work to the best of their ability. Of the humanistic attitudes contributing to such a learning atmosphere, I would like to share five, along with their parallels in writing center traditions, that have been especially helpful in my tutoring sessions. For simplicity, I have arranged them into the acronym “TEACH”—Trust, Equality, Acceptance, Care, and Honesty.

Trust is the attitude by which tutors show confidence in students' skills as writers. When we employ Jeff Brooks' “minimalist tutoring” (1) approach and show students our trust in their ability to make improvements in their papers, we reflect Carl Rogers' “person-centered learning” in which the instructor shows “trust in the capacity of others to think for themselves” (299). Rogers believes that only instructors who trust students' innate abilities will allow them to be self-directing and responsible in their

learning. By showing students our trust in them as writers, we are, according to humanist learning theory, preparing them to be able to make responsible decisions in other areas of their lives. I have found that my confidence is contagious to students, and when I show them I believe they can do a good job (usually by praising what they have done well and allowing them to contribute) they also believe in their skills as writers and work harder.

The next attitude, equality, is best reflected in Sally Crisp et al.'s concept of “assertive collaboration” in which tutors assume to be “neither more nor less than the other . . . on the basis of who ‘holds’ the knowledge” (12). William Glasser finds that once instructors “succeed in shedding the ‘boss image’” (62), students work harder and “feel empowered” (128). By showing students we do not assume control over conferences, truly collaborative efforts are possible. I have found that when students feel we are working together, they sense their input is important and usually end up taking the initiative and want to make improvements themselves.

Another way tutors encourage students to contribute during conferences is by showing students they accept them for who they are and where they are at in their writing ability. A humanistic attitude of acceptance involves remaining flexible to the needs of students as those needs present themselves. As Irene Clark suggests, we must avoid formulas in our practice and “deal with an individual student at a given moment” (83). Arthur Combs asserts that teachers who accept students for who they are enable

them to be “dynamic forces” (102) in their learning and provide “optimal conditions for self-discovery” (74). When we respond to the unpredictable ideas and information which students present to us, we meet them at their level and encourage them to think and reflect more deeply upon their attitudes and points of view. When students realize that my role is not to judge or criticize them, but rather to meet and help them at whatever level of ability they are, they feel at ease and willingly contribute their ideas. Tutors also communicate their acceptance when they show they care about what students are saying.

The next attitude, “care,” is especially important when we listen, because, as Janet Fishbain remarks, “sometimes communication is emotional, not rational” (10). I find that when I listen with “patience and respect” (2) as Sylvia Salisbury suggests, students feel what they are saying is important. Glasser advises teachers to listen carefully to students because it encourages them to express themselves. I discovered that when I show I am sincerely listening to students, by maintaining eye contact or taking notes as they speak, they develop confidence in what they have to say. As a result, they are not intimidated to form and develop their thoughts as they free themselves of fears which may inhibit the writing process.

Honesty is another attitude writing tutors share with humanistic educators. We show honesty when we are “ourselves” instead of assuming an air of authority with students. Rogers (1990) notes that when instructors meet learners on a one-to-one basis without putting on

a “front or facade” (306), they are most effective. As Crisp et al. reminds us, there is no role-playing in writing centers, so “real talking and real listening can happen” (13). I have found that by being myself, I am able to have comfortable discussions with students. I can voice my honest opinions with which students feel comfortable enough to agree or disagree, and even ask them questions to which I may not have the answers. When students see that I am relying on them to provide solutions, they are glad to provide ideas and inputs which guide the conference. As positive self-concepts are encouraged, I can more easily employ the “minimalist tutoring” approach as I show trust in students’ abilities.

Trust, equality, acceptance, care, and honesty—practices which writing tutors use informally everyday—actually have a formal, scientific basis in humanistic psychology. By using them, we provide the atmosphere which allows students to

be self-directing in their learning. If our goal as tutors is, as Brooks suggests, to improve student writers, not just papers, I believe the humanistic “TEACH”ing attitudes discussed here provide keys to our success.

*Elisa Ham  
Brookdale Community College  
Lincroft, NJ*

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N E W S L E T T E R

Muriel Harris, editor  
Department of English  
Purdue University  
1356 Heavilon Hall  
West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356

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