

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 20, Number 5

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

January, 1995

## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

We're always delighted to hear that the *Writing Lab Newsletter* is a useful publication—and especially pleased when you ask about individual subscriptions for the tutoring staff. In the past, we had no group or student rates, but our newsletter assistant, Mary Jo Turley, has been working diligently on this. She's succeeded in wrangling information from our campus printing and mailing offices and has come up with a price structure for group rates within the United States.

For ten or more subscriptions to the same address in the U.S., the yearly rate is \$12.50; for twenty or more subscriptions to the same address, the yearly rate is \$10. This doesn't distinguish between students and faculty and applies to any group at that address. Please note that a group rate precludes all the individual handling that normally goes on. That is, we absorb the costs of returned issues, address changes, and so on for individual subscriptions, but for these group rates, we'll put individual names on each issue, but they will be delivered to one address.

If you have questions about this, please contact Mary Jo (see page two for her various addresses and numbers). We hope these cheaper rates meet the need you've expressed.

• Muriel Harris, editor

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## Basic writers as tutors

Recently, I had the rare opportunity of having my basic writing class under-enrolled. With only 16 students in two sections, I was able to conduct an experiment I had wanted to try for some time. As a teacher of basic writing, I am well aware of the low level of confidence many of these students possess, and I wanted to see if I could help boost their confidence.

In recent years two views of basic writers have emerged. One view cites the 'deficiencies' of basic writers, the skills that such students lack. The role of the basic writing instructor is to bring these students up to the standards of 'regular' students. The unique attributes of basic students are seen as problems to be eliminated. A more positive view defines the qualities of basic writers as strengths rather than deficiencies. Teachers with this perspective recognize the special qualities of their basic students and use these qualities as a means by which to instruct them. Instead of helping them to 'catch up' to 'regular' students, these basic writing teachers use the strengths of individual basic writers to help each one develop writing strategies that best suit the individual student. The lack of experience basic writers

have is compounded by not only their fears and suspicions about “academic” writing but their resistance to it as well. Mina Shaughnessy recognized this in her studies of basic writers:

For the Basic Writing student, academic writing is a trap, not a way of saying something to someone. By the time he reaches college, the Basic Writing student both resents and resists his vulnerability as a

writer. . . . But he doesn't know what to do about it. (3)

Shaughnessy noted that such students feel “left out” because they can communicate in their own environment but not in the college atmosphere. They lack confidence in their ability to communicate. However, some researchers have found that basic writers possess certain traits that allow them to communicate. One is what Walter Ong calls “orality.” Lynn Quitman Troyka has identified this “orality” as a strength to be nurtured. It was upon this strength that I built my study.

I wanted to combat the resentment and feelings of powerlessness that basic writers experience by putting them in the position of teaching others. My goal was to build my students' confidence by putting them in positions of authority. By allowing them to use their own background as basic writers to help others, I wanted them to see how much they really knew. Also, by using their verbal skills rather than formal writing, they were able to teach students in ways with which they felt comfortable. I saw this as my chance to test the idea that has long been a part of the “lore” of English teachers: You don't really understand grammar until you teach it to others.

I contacted a sixth-grade English teacher at a local junior high school. She taught a variety of classes but had one developmental course with several students who needed more help than she could provide. She agreed to allow my students to meet individually with her developmental students once a week for six weeks. The tutoring sessions replaced one class meeting per week in my basic writing course. My students went over lessons with the sixth graders, read their essays, and encouraged them in their course work. As a result, the sixth graders and my college freshmen benefited. My students were graded on the time log they kept of the tutoring sessions and on their journal responses. One of the most interesting aspects of the experiment was something I threw in

as an afterthought—a reward system over which my students had total control. I purchased small items such as pencils, erasers, stickers, etc. and gave each of my students a supply that they were to give out as rewards when the students made significant progress or exerted extra effort. My students took this task seriously and often held off rewards until they thought their students had earned them.

My students began the project with mixed feelings. While they were happy to get out of class one day per week, they felt that they wouldn't be smart enough to help anyone else. Their apprehension soon proved unwarranted, though, when they actually began. Even the Japanese student who was most worried about being up to the task soon found that the students' skills were much more basic than she had expected. At the class session immediately after the first tutoring session, almost everyone responded positively to their first experience. The most common comment? “That could have been me when I was in sixth grade.” They took their own previous experience and used it to encourage their students. Many reported making comments such as, “Look at me. I was in the developmental class, and now I'm in college. If I can do it, anybody can.” In class discussions on the project, students began to share frustrations and successes with the others who provided ideas and positive feedback. I've never done anything in any class before that elicited so much discussion.

Most of my students established rapport with the sixth graders by talking about their own experiences in English classes. After getting to know their sixth graders, most of the tutors attempted to diagnose the problems their students encountered:

Because she missed two days of class, Amanda had missed doing verbs and linking verbs. We looked over what she had to do, and she had a lot of trouble finding the verb. So I asked her if she knew what a prepositional phrase

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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.

was. Amanda was unfamiliar with what I said because the teacher hasn't taught them yet what it means. I said if you could find the prepositional phrase you could find the verb a lot easier. So I showed her how to use prepositional phrases, but I don't think she understood that well. She had a lot of trouble finding the verb because she didn't understand what an action verb was. She had trouble with linking verbs too until I showed her an easy way to find them.

Angie tried really hard. She had problems with spelling, but the more I bragged on her, the better she did . . . . When I left, a lot of the students in the class told me good bye and said "See you next week!"

I'm glad I'm getting the opportunity to help children. I remember how I used to wish someone would take the time to help me on my work.

Danny and I worked on worksheets that dealt with possessive nouns. While we were working on the worksheets, I noticed that Danny does not read the directions to his assignments. I also noticed that Danny has a problem with reading certain words such as "of," "for," "were," and "ready," to name just a few.

After a while, many of my students began to notice changes in the students they were tutoring. They also began to discover that students may fail to learn for a variety of reasons:

I have a feeling that she really enjoys the time we spend together. The minute I got there I received my every Thursday hug. I talked to the teacher today, and she said she's seeing changes in Crystal slowly but surely. Crystal is becoming more organized and isn't as lazy as she used to be.

When I walked into the classroom today, the children looked at me like I was a god. This was a fun experience. I enjoyed helping them with their spelling words. Kids at this age aren't very sure of themselves. Encouragement is something that is needed during the middle school years. If they don't have it at that point in time, they seem not to have confidence in themselves later in life. I made sure to tell them they were doing a great job and to keep trying because they would get it sooner or later.

My students' reports of their successes in tutoring corresponded with the positive comments the sixth grade teacher made about her students. Naturally, though, I was most interested in the changes in my own students. Unanimously, my freshmen responded positively to the experience and recommended that I continue the practice in future classes. In fact, the only criticism was that the experience didn't last long enough. Their comments reflect success for their students as well as for themselves:

I gave Trevor my address, and he gave me his phone number so that we could stay in touch. He said that he will write to me to let me know how he's doing. I enjoyed helping Trevor. I felt that he needed to be helped with his confidence, and I believe he has a lot more confidence at this point. It also gave me experience of working with someone I didn't know. With me going into education I will face other students like Trevor. I now know that it won't always be just the mind but the student's confidence level that's keeping him from learning.

I believe this tutoring was a really good experience for me. It helped me understand kids that age more and also helped me with my English. It was a good learning

experience for both of us.

Even more important to me, though, was the change in my students. The tutoring boosted their confidence enormously and made them pay attention to their own learning styles. As authorities to the sixth graders, they were responsible for finding the right answers. This involved reading the book carefully, following directions and sticking with a task until it was completed correctly. These are all things the college students needed to do for their own classes; they're also things many of them had never done before. While their writing and grammatical skills didn't change dramatically, one wonderful outcome of the experience was their increased tendency to take risks. Students who had always tried to just "get by" became willing to take on new challenges, including some exciting essay topics and discussions.

Helping to make a small difference in the lives of the sixth graders allowed them to make some important differences in their own lives as well.

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# Collaboration and college application essays: Two writing center perspectives

*Pamela B. Childers, Writing Center Director, The McCallie School, writes:*

Writing centers, as centers of writing across the curriculum in secondary schools, serve as an important service when students begin working with college application essays. Sure, English classes focus on persuasive essays, and guidance counselors help with the application forms; parents even choose their children's essay topics. But where else may students go to work one-on-one with a writing teacher as a reader/listener. As an English teacher, I used to manipulate time to work with a few individual students between classes, before or after school, or on-line at night. However, five classes of writing, plus other duties, with three course preparations a day prevented focused, follow-up conferences with many students.

In our writing center in New Jersey, students used to drop off college application essays at the beginning of the period, leave post-a-note messages asking questions or telling the topic of the essay, and a time when they were free to talk. Somehow I managed to respond to their concerns, ask questions of their drafts in the margins, and leave the papers in the OUT box by the door. Most of these students had been members of my junior college preparatory English classes the previous year. They knew they could call me at home in the evenings with questions or find me before, after school, or during lunch. It certainly wasn't an ideal situation, but at least they were getting the personal feedback they

needed in a non-threatening environment from an objective reader who was not grading them.

Now I direct a writing center without a full teaching load. The difference is amazing, especially to the students who take advantage of our services. They know that the writing center staff will not give them answers, only ask them questions to help them focus, think, organize, take risks, and demonstrate to the colleges of their choice that they are literate, critical thinking human beings. What happens in this process is a demonstration, with the addition of the computer, of valuable dialogues between students and the writing center staff. The gift that we get is learning more about individuals, gaining positive experiences with self-motivated young people, and interacting with them as writers. There is no distinction in roles; we function as collaborators to create the essays that characterize them in their own words. To demonstrate what happens, I have asked one of them to describe what we have done. Hopefully, those of you who are college instructors and admissions personnel will have a better understanding of the work we do.

What is typical of these writers is that their individual writing processes determine the style of interaction that takes place in the writing center. For instance, one writer knows what he wants to do, senses what is wrong, and leads the discussion; another begins with a skeleton of an essay and must "beef it up" with details before we get into the conference

interaction. Another student, Jud, describes his own process.

*Jud Laughter, Senior, The McCallie School, writes:*

Every fall, seniors unconsciously register for an extra class. What this class includes depends on the student, but the effect is the same—late nights sweating over seven-hundred-word essays, panicking over a dead toner cartridge, and searching for portraits that were needed yesterday. Seniors don't even recognize they are signed up for the class; yet it is the most important one for getting them into college. What is this monstrous course, that exists even without a teacher? It is filling out college applications. For three months, seniors spend every bit of their free time typing social security numbers, checking little boxes, and inflating ten-word prompts into five-hundred-word pieces of literary art.

I recently underwent the most rigorous test of composure and time management I will ever face. My school nominated me for The Morehead grant at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and The Honors Scholarship for Emory University in Atlanta. I felt honored, but I didn't hear anything about the scholarships, other than the letter that explained the nomination. After waiting two weeks, I went to see if there were any forms I had to fill out for such awards. My counselor went crazy. "You mean you haven't gotten the forms yet? I guess I assumed I had given them to you, as much as I see you." That was that.

My counselor gave me two weeks to fill out eighteen pages of applications, find three black-and-white portraits, and write, type, and correct three four-hundred-word essays, two seven-hundred-and-fifty-word essays, and one two-hundred-word short-answer question. Now, if I had three months, no problem, but fourteen days? Again, no problem. While your everyday Joe Senior would go into a frenzy, I calmly went to talk to my writing center director, and good friend, Dr. Childers.

We first sat down, and I explained the great catastrophe that would ensue if I could not complete my work. She agreed to help, and we got to work right away. I planned to do one piece a day, having seven essays total. Such a schedule gave me plenty of time to rework tricky passages and such. As I barreled through my essays, Doc and I worked out a very effective procedure for creating the necessary literary masterpiece. I would come in first and type a rough draft of my paper, applying an approximate word count. Then I would leave for class. Doc would read through the essay, make sure I answered the question, and **BOLD** any sections or words that were questionable. I would return and run through the piece, repairing the bold enigmas. Then, we would spend about an hour shortening (they always exceeded the maximum), strengthening and generally reinforcing my paper. By the time we finished, we looked upon pieces that amazed even me. The last step was just schematics, fitting words onto forms, running test papers, and such nonsense.

That was the process, which is only half as important as how we actually revised. The important thing was that Doc never wrote a word of my papers. I can truthfully claim that every word I sent to a school was my own. Doc asked a lot of questions; "Is this really what you want to say?" or "Explain in simple English this nebulous concept." It was amazing how easy some words came out

and lined up in perfect order. Of course, there were a few problems. The first paragraph of my last essay went through at least six revisions. I could never remember to hyphenate my numbers either.

The outcome was always well-worded, informative essays. We virtually eliminated the passive voice. (It's one of Doc's pet peeves.) Linking verbs transformed into amazing action verbs. I worked an argumentative essay into four-hundred words. I am very proud of the essays I wrote. At times, I wanted to quit revising and just send in the latest draft, but Doc would not allow such decadence. I revised every word of every essay until each one approached perfection. The writing center acted as the most important center for my college writing. It became a home for me, a place where I was comfortable in spilling my guts onto the screen, then having someone help me pick them up. I believe that if every senior had the opportunity to use such a facility, college application essays would not prove so daunting a task.

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Center Director  
and  
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## NWCA News

(cont. from p. 12)

- Linda F. White, Stephen F. Austin University  
"Tutoring Students with Learning Disabilities"
- Joan Hawthorne, University of North Dakota  
"Tutoring and WAC Programs"
- Eric Hobson, St. Louis College of Pharmacy  
"Tutoring in Special Sites and Situations"

Anyone unable to attend the workshop and wanting to obtain materials and information on these topics is invited to contact the workshop leaders, who will be glad to assist.

### Future Plans and Projects

At the 1996 CCCC meeting in Milwaukee, the Executive Board will consider adding a position to the Board for a graduate student representative. We invite comments and suggestions on this proposal and any others on the structure of the Board. Please address them to Christina Murphy or Joan Mullin.

During 1996, NWCA will undertake its first national survey on the operations and services of NWCA and also on the present state of affairs in the writing center field. The survey will be made available through *Writing Lab Newsletter* and through a national mail out. Results of the survey will be published in *Writing Lab Newsletter*. If there are specific concerns you would like the survey to address, please contact Christina Murphy and let her know.

1996 promises to be an exciting and active year for NWCA. I invite all of you to participate in NWCA and in its regional organizations and help us make it the finest of professional organizations.

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# New metaphors for the writing center

Metaphors, as research and experience show us, are powerful lenses through which reality is both reflected and shaped. As George Eliot comments in *Middlemarch*, “We all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them” (qtd. in Kloss 134). Or as Howard Pollio puts it: “Metaphors do not enliven or explain our concepts; they frequently are our concepts” (9). If we believe the writing center is a prison, madhouse, or hospital—as Michael Pemberton has explored in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*—then we will act in ways which transform that metaphor into reality. Elaborating such negative metaphors can therefore be useful in helping us name what we want to avoid. If we find we are in fact operating as a hospital—treating clients like patients, applying emergency aid, hoarding expertise—then this knowledge can initiate a rethinking of the principles that inform those actions. Given the power of metaphors to name and point, it follows that writing centers should work not only to avoid negative metaphors but to develop positive ones in their places. Positive metaphors may help define those goals we want to move toward as well as suggest behaviors that could achieve those goals. Finally, positive metaphors can help us present ourselves to faculty and students in ways that encourage their collaboration rather than their resistance. Here I’d like to propose and elaborate two positive metaphors for the writing center.

## The Writing Health Club

The first of these replaces the familiar concept of illness, underlying the hospital and madhouse metaphors, with the opposite of illness: wellness. What happens to our perceptions of the writing center when we view it as a health club?

The Writing Health Club attracts as clients basically healthy writers who want to keep fit, rather than the terminally ill who are unable to put two sentences together. No one is required to join, though some doctors may suggest membership to some of their patients; instead, members join voluntarily because the club offers an appealing location, hours, staff, and/or activities. The club offers varied means of enhancing writing fitness, including computer machines, verb-strengthening and editing exercises, and group classes in drafting and revising, from which club members can choose.

Trained staff at the Writing Club are persons who themselves are fit and who have appropriate attitudes, knowledge, and skills to keep themselves fit and help others become so. Staff plan, write, and revise along with members, just as aerobics teachers dance along with their students. Staff function as coaches to help motivate members (“I know you can do another draft!”), sequence activities (“Brainstorm before you outline”), guide members in choosing appropriate activities (“Wouldn’t this be a good time to reread the story?”), and encourage discipline when necessary (“Yes, *you* have to find and correct all those fragments”). Thus staff training must enable staff to assess and respond to a variety of needs, to work alongside members, and to understand the complex relation of the mind to the body.

In choosing to join the Writing Club, members expect to work hard and long to achieve their goal of continuing good writing health. They know that regular exercise is necessary to strengthen their writing muscles, that exercise may sometimes “hurt good,” and that sweat-

ing to rework that paragraph may be messy. They also know that ultimately it’s easier to prevent failing papers than to repair them and that fitness in composing demands lifetime good practice—one session at the club will not guarantee continuing persuasive and imagistic strength or discourse flexibility. Members expect to involve their whole bodies in becoming fit, not simply to exercise specifically to remedy trouble spots. They also know that fitness depends on what they do away from the club—on whether they indulge in unhealthy habits such as chain drafting, skipping regular practice, failing to sequence assignments, or pigging out on sugary prose that leads to flab.

Though they know that writing fitness demands work, members also expect to have fun at the club. They expect to meet new friends, to relax, and to play. Though they expect occasionally to gain new knowledge about authorial health through reading books, watching films, or listening to speakers, they know that engaging in a variety of whole-writer activities is the best way to learn. They also know that writing “fitness” is more relative than absolute; members and staff measure progress toward fitness by improvement, stressing individual growth rather than competition with others.

Finally, members of the Writing Club know that stretching writing muscles involves risk, sometimes injury, as they take new approaches to writing, try different types of discourse, get a new teacher, or forget to warm up. The club’s facilities are set up to minimize the possibility of injury, but members must agree to accept responsibility for themselves—the staff can’t guarantee “A” papers. When injury does occur, the

staff is responsive, applying immediate remedies and suggesting long-term ways to prevent recurrences.

When we see the writing center as a Health Club, then, we go a long way toward describing attitudes and behaviors we want to encourage in clients and peer consultants. As the concept and practice of wellness becomes more widely known—at Berea, entering students must now take a course called Introduction to Wellness—then writing centers might well build on these concepts as we advertise our services and state our policies. Practicing writing wellness may invite the kinds of clients we hope to reach, as well as help us to anticipate and avoid the misunderstandings about the nature of our assistance that the hospital and madhouse metaphors have created.

### The Writing Church

If the writing center as Health Club stresses writing as body, my second metaphor stresses writing as spirit. What happens to the writing center when we envision it as a Christian church?

Parishioners of the Writing Church attend services regularly, partly to work on the souls of their essays and partly to socialize with other church members. Writing Church ministers regularly engage in the laying on of hands to help heal wounded writers, with a bond of confidentiality and trust characterizing their relationships with their parishioners. Writing Church ministers are called to service, expect and receive little monetary reward for their work, work irregular and extended hours—many outside the church building, in dormitories and libraries—and find their work both satisfying and draining. Ministers and parishioners generally share a writing process ideology; God as Perfect Paper may exist, but knowing that God is often a mystery. Some ministers and parishioners may become zealous in searching for converts to the writing process and intolerant of differences in the definition of and approaches to the Perfect Paper.

In many ways this metaphor is apt—particularly in its casting of the staff's role. Yet the staff exploitation suggested is hardly desirable, and some other dimensions of the metaphor are certainly problematic: the assumption of an exclusive writing ideology, the potential intolerance of non-practitioners, the implicit hierarchy (if peer consultants are ministers, is the director a bishop?). Thinking less of formal hierarchical religious structures and concentrating instead on dimensions of spirituality leads to a fuller illumination of the writing center's goals and approaches. To embody metaphorically this shift from structure to spirituality, we might select—from the many religions emphasizing spiritual practices—the Quaker meeting.

At first, a Friends' Meeting seems antithetical to normal writing center life. At Quaker Meeting for Worship, Friends share a circle of silence, seeking insight—quite a contrast to our active, even chaotic writing centers. A center, after all, as a bookmark from my own center proclaims, is “a place of concentrated activity”; action is surely central to our work. We assist, we try, we do, we accomplish; we hope our student clients will have tangible things—better papers—to show for their work with us. Yet action for action's sake, as Parker Palmer illustrates in his discussion of the Taoist poem “Active Life,” may become frenzied, forced, pointless, and even harmful (*Active Life* 35-53). Meaningful action must be grounded in an authenticity accessible through contemplation. If we shift “center” from noun to verb, we can begin the journey inward. When we center, as at a Quaker meeting, we deliberately quiet ourselves and heighten our awareness; we go down and in to seek what Thomas Merton called “the ‘hidden wholeness’ that lies beneath the broken surface of our lives” (*Active Life* 29). Through centered contemplation, we discover our failings and also our gifts. If we tutor or teach without such deep self-understanding, how can our work matter to us or to those we serve?

When we are centered, we are able to “listen with the ear of the heart,” as the Rule of St. Benedict describes it (Chittister 24) and to hear not only in our own language but also “in the tongue of the other” (22). We can bring a focused attention to those with whom we work. Through centered contemplation, we learn that, as Mary Rose O'Reilly suggests, accepting and allowing are modes of teaching as important as trying and doing (124).

When we in the writing center are centered, we are ready to create a hospitable environment for those we serve. Hospitality, as Henri Nouwen defines it in *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, means “the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy” (71). Hospitality thus converts the hostility that characterizes many institutions and relationships. Nouwen goes on to define hospitality through a series of contrasts:

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. . . . It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not an educated intimidation with good books, good stories and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find roots and bear ample fruit. . . . (71-2)

Surely this concept of hospitality is what writing centers want to make possible for their clients. Note the dimensions we reveal for the consultant's role when we describe her as host:

The good host is the one who believes that his guest is carrying a promise he wants to reveal to anyone who shows genuine interest. . . . The good host is the one who not only helps the guests to see that they have hidden talents, but who also is able to help them develop and deepen these

talents so that they can continue their way on their own with a renewed self-confidence. (Nouwen 87-88)

The concept of hospitality helps us to understand that our student clients, in Nouwen's terms, "are not just the poor, needy, ignorant beggars who come to the man or woman of knowledge, but . . . are indeed like guests who honor the house with their visit and will not leave it without having made their own contribution" (89). Hospitable places operate on the assumption of abundance, rather than on the assumption of scarcity that informs much of the academy (Palmer, "Scarcity" 1). In hospitable places, as in the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality founded by Dorothy Day, workers and guests become indistinguishable (Coles 111)—and both learn.

At our weekly meeting of our writing center staffs, then, we can engage in practices designed to release our spirituality. We can take time to center, through silence or reflection in writing or on a reading. We can work to listen respectfully to others when they speak. We can try to create a hospitable environment for our co-workers so that problems can be addressed and mutually resolved. We can celebrate our abundance through naming our gifts and sharing our successes. Practiced at least once a week, these actions should help us carry the spirit of the Quaker meeting to our clients in our daily work.

In conclusion, then, these metaphors—health club and Quaker meeting—have two important messages for us. The first is that beneath these apparently different visions for the writing center—the health club emphasizes body and action; the Quaker meeting, spirit and contemplation—lie some deep similarities. Despite their differences, both metaphors stress health, wholeness, and abundance; both assume a fundamental equality between consultant and client, an equality of engagement and practice. The second message is the power of metaphors to open our inner eyes, to free up that vision

without which the people perish. Metaphors have this power, as Peter Elbow has observed, regardless of their accuracy (79). What doesn't fit in the metaphor can be as revealing as what does. Multiple metaphors also yield insights, as they bump up against one another. Though the two I've developed here have connected, disjunctures can be equally revealing.

For me, the elaboration of metaphors for the writing center has had rewards in process and outcome. Begun three years ago as a way of understanding and thus of coping with criticism my center had received, the writing of both negative and positive metaphors gave me enjoyment, a fresh perspective, a clearer understanding of my critics, and a sense of regained control. Sharing the writing with one of my critics helped us begin to discuss our different perceptions of the Center. Recently, deepening the church metaphor has helped me connect my growing spirituality with my work. Sharing my writing and thinking with my student staff has resulted in some changes in our practices; more, it has triggered a subtle shift in our thinking together about our community. Metaphorical thinking, in its play and insight, is seductive: where will it end? Not until we've explored the writing center as home, the writing center as circus, the writing center as intentional community, the writing center as dance, the writing center as soccer game . . . (soccer game???).

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## New group rates for WLN

You asked for it—we're offering it! If you are interested in group rates for subscriptions to the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, please see the explanation on page one, in the editor's note.



# TUTORS' COLUMN

## Rehabilitating the writing center junkie

When I first began tutoring in the Learning Center at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, I figured that if I could give a writer enough of myself, we could accomplish anything . . . and everything. Their potential for improvement was boundless. Where do these illusions come from? Students often arrive, paper in hand, envisioning some distant perfection. And we have been and often are them—students—victims of the same untraceable social false advertising. Instructors (people who should know better) also frequently expect that tutoring will perfect their students' writing. It is this expectation of fixing *everything* that impedes the setting of goals in tutoring sessions. Unlimited aspirations require unlimited time. It took over a year of working with writers, much of the time still trying to give them too much, for me to realize what was wrong.

Just two weeks into my tutor training course, my friend Randy asked for help. "On what?" I asked. "Everything," she said, "This paper's got to be perfect." Our very first session quickly transformed my fantasies into nightmares. At that point, I had learned little more than that tutors should ask writers questions to stimulate thought instead of telling them what to fix.

I went over to her house at 6 p.m., and we sat down with her paper. The first mistake we made was trying to go line-by-line. We hadn't really gotten into specifics in my class yet, so I didn't realize we were asking for trouble. We tried to work on individual lines and entire paragraphs at the same time. Problems of spelling, punctuation, grammar, passive voice, unclear sentences, unsubstan-

tiated assertions, and flawed ideas rose up before us. And it became impossible to continue trying to fix everything at once. Within half an hour the number of problems in the paper had overwhelmed and paralyzed us.

After that, we practically had to whip ourselves to keep going. Since I insisted on using the questioning method we were learning in class, I had a blinding headache from trying to think of a question for everything I could find wrong. Randy suffered countless lethargic fits of propping her forehead on her hand and her elbow on the table and moaning, "Ohhhhhh, I don't knooooow." We both thought she was a completely hopeless writer with hundreds of insurmountable problems, even though she wasn't—our unchecked sprawling had only succeeded in muddying everything.

At half-past midnight, I absolutely had to leave. I had postponed my own work until I no longer had time to do it. The fact that we hadn't even touched the last two pages of her paper frustrated both of us. We felt as if we had opened the door to a messy closet, and been buried in the avalanche of its contents. Whenever we recovered enough strength to try to clean up the debris, the stuff wouldn't fit back in—it was more than we could pick up in an hour. Really, opening and shutting a closet door is a lot like tutoring: if it takes more than an hour, there's something wrong.

Somewhere during that first appointment, Randy had become addicted to tutoring. She could not understand how she had managed without it all these years. She also couldn't write another word without seeking some sort of guid-

ance. Randy had insisted that we meet again the next day. And, although I couldn't stand the idea of spending another six hours trapped in a room with her, I agreed purely out of a sense of obligation: I saw no other way for her to become "functional" by the end of the semester.

I also felt helpless. I decided that the questioning method we learned in class was defective. It never occurred to me to wait until the end of the semester before I worked with my first victim. I was actually like a pre-med student trying to diagnose and cure my best friend, using only the first chapter of my *Concepts In Biology* text.

Looking back, I know Randy's addiction actually started during the first fifteen minutes, when we failed to set reasonable goals. From that point on, we were only wasting our time. We applied so many different strategies and rules to her paper that she ended up remembering none of them. Randy learned nothing that evening except that she desperately needed a tutor—unfortunately, this one thing wasn't even true.

It probably wouldn't surprise you to hear that, at the same time, I also had this problem working with my brother. One Saturday afternoon, he asked me if I would look over his paper. I asked him to sit down for a minute, but it was actually about an hour and a half before we reached the end of his paper. Afterward, he snatched it back, glared at me, and shuffled away. He hated writing and I hated helping him. He recently told me that he had "just wanted a few ideas or suggestions, not a complete overhaul. I didn't want to put up with all that," he

said. "It made me feel like writing it the first time was a complete and utter waste of time." He also said he had felt like neither he nor his writing were good enough.

Although my inexperience caused these problems, it allowed me the opportunity to learn from my mistakes. Because I didn't know any better, I stumbled upon a problem it turned out many of my fellow tutors had also encountered. Whenever a writer I worked with became dependent, it was because we both saw tutoring as a quick fix instead of a step in their learning process. Tutors who expect to fix all of their writers' problems actually force them to give up responsibility for their writing. Dependence occurs because they expect the tutor will transform their writing. This line of thinking automatically renders students helpless: if everything they write must be perfect, every word must be approved by the tutor.

I now know that bringing a paper to a tutor is not like bringing a car to a mechanic. Good tutors do not "fix" papers. Good tutors help students become better writers—no, not perfect writers—there's no such thing as a perfect writer or a perfect paper. Those who expect perfection will be disappointed to hear this. They might wonder what good tutoring is at all, then—since they need to end up with a perfect paper. Tutors need to remember that, though they can't get to everything, the paper will inevitably be better than if the writer hadn't come for help at all. We must each decide for ourselves where the line is between too much help and not enough.

The expectation that seeing a tutor will fix all of a paper's problems disempowers the writer and lends itself to a line-by-line approach. By trying to work on everything at once, the writer doesn't get any control over any one thing. Going over a paper sentence-by-sentence results in tutors doing the writers' work for them. And, if you try to do everything, you will end up doing nothing. As I found with both Randy and my brother,

this approach obscured our vision of the paper. We couldn't see that there were patterns of error—we saw, instead, five or six problems per line spread out over hundreds of lines, which added up to thousands of problems.

When I asked my brother what would have changed our session into a positive one, he said "students and tutors both have to be focused on one or two things. Otherwise, you concentrate on the big things *and* the little things so it seems like much more. It's overwhelming when no one's focused. I also didn't like to feel pressured like I had to be tutored." The first step in solving my writer-dependence problem was to reject the myths of unlimited time, unlimited goals, and the perfect paper. Then, after considering the impact these myths and ineffective strategies had on the students, I arrived at a conclusion that both tutors and writers can live with.

To prevent tutoring addiction, time limits are essential. In a one-on-one setting, appointments should last no longer than an hour. In walk-in where there is often a waiting line, the amount of time spent actually working on the paper should be limited to roughly 15 minutes. The time limits themselves are not the only thing that makes this solution effective—their consequences are equally important. When tutors and writers both know from the start that time is limited, they are much more likely to set specific priorities and stick with them.

Generally speaking, if a writer comes to a session without goals, making sure the paper contains well developed, well thought-out ideas should be most important, then substantiation using specific personal examples. Finally, in the event of an otherwise beautiful paper, writer and tutor can worry about grammar or punctuation or spelling. In an appointment situation, tutors should read the students' work and then help them decide what to work on. In walk-in, after reading papers, tutors should help writers identify their *most important* concern. Sessions in which writers continue with

out questions or goals are the most likely to lead to dependence. Vague requests for help tempt us most to skim the surface or analyze line-by-line.

When students come to the sessions with predetermined goals, those goals should come first—whenever practical. For instance, if writers are worried about comma splices and their ideas are well thought out and supported, by all means work on comma splices. However, when tutors find more fundamental concerns, they should explain those concerns and their impact first, giving students an opportunity to adjust their priorities accordingly.

If at the end not enough time remains to work on comma splices, students could also take a hand-out home or make another appointment. Conceptual problems are usually more significant than mechanical ones. For example, a few weeks ago my Shakespeare professor returned a paper to me in which I had made several logical errors, but had used commas and semi-colons beautifully. His comments did not read: "Your paper doesn't make a lot of sense, but your punctuation was beautiful—I'll give you the A anyway."

Furthermore, in either walk-in or appointment situations, fifteen minutes is plenty of time to tackle one particular problem or concept. Even just a bit more time often leads students to believe that they need the tutor beside them in order to make progress, instead of understand that tutoring should make them able to tackle even more by themselves. My poor brother was worried about proper semi-colon use. In five minutes, I should have been able to explain that they are used to join two related independent clauses that could ordinarily stand alone. In the next five minutes, I could have helped him find a couple of places where he used semi-colons in his paper and determine whether or not they were used correctly. Finally, in the last five minutes, he would have been able to do a few practice sentences or correct misuses in his own paper. After fifteen minutes,

he would have been able to handle semicolons on his own with confidence. In an hour he could have conquered four different groups of problems.

However, we need to remember that these time guidelines are just that—guidelines. Rigid agendas don't allow writers or tutors to be human, and occasionally exert too much pressure. I would never recommend that tutors should end sessions in the middle of their explanation (or writers' questions) simply because sixty minutes had elapsed. Fifteen and sixty are not magic numbers and do not, by themselves, prevent writer dependence. Even within these guidelines, tutors and writers must remember to set goals and priorities. They need to focus. Time limits simply help us make a habit of practicing these strategies.

Finally, I need to mention that I am encouraged by discovering I've made these mistakes. The idea of *not* discovering them is what would horrify me. We all benefit from learning to recognize and prevent writer dependence. We can take comfort in realizing that sometimes it's wrong to try as hard as we are often expected to, and we should no longer feel guilty that hectic schedules and waiting lines limit the time we can devote to our students.

*Jeannine A. Broadwell*  
(formerly a Peer Tutor at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh)  
Teaching Assistant  
North Carolina State University  
Raleigh, NC

## Calendar for Writing Centers

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).

Oct. 24-26: Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association, in Albuquerque, NM  
Contact: Anne Mullin, Writing Lab, Campus Box 8010, Idaho State University, Pocatello, ID 83209 (208-236-3662).

## Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association

Call for Papers  
October 24-26, 1996  
Albuquerque, NM

Please send one-page proposals for presentations that address writing center issues such as writing center administration, outreach, tutor training, innovative programs, collaborative teaching and learning, ethics, tutoring ESL students, applications of theory to practice, and computers in the writing center to: Anne Mullin, Director, Writing Lab, Campus Box 8010, Idaho State University, Pocatello, ID 83209. Phone: 208-236-3662; fax: 208-236-4611; e-mail: mullanne@isu.edu. Proposals must be postmarked by March 1, 1996.

## News from the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA)

### New Officers and Board Members

At the NCTE conference in San Diego, Byron L. Stay of Mount Saint Mary's College completed his term as NWCA President. The Executive Board thanks Byron for his excellent service to NWCA and to the writing center profession.

### Our new officers for 1996 will be:

- Christina Murphy, President  
Texas Christian University
- Joan Mullin, 1st Vice President  
University of Toledo
- Albert C. DeCiccio, 2nd Vice President  
Merrimack College
- Michael Pemberton, Treasurer  
University of Illinois
- Paula Gillespie, Executive Secretary  
Marquette University

We had a tie for one of the positions, so six new representatives were elected to the Executive Board.

### At-Large Representatives

- Beth Boquet  
Fairfield University
- Lady Falls Brown  
Texas Tech University
- Deborah Burns  
Merrimack College
- Carl Glover  
Mount Saint Mary's College
- Ghussan Greene  
South Carolina State University

### High School Representative

- Jeannette Jordan  
Glenbrook North High School

We welcome these new representatives and look forward to their contributions in guiding NWCA and helping to shape its future.

### Report on the 1995 NWCA Conference

Eric Hobson, Program Chair for the 1995 NWCA Conference in St. Louis,

reports that 375 people attended the conference and that evaluations were extremely positive on the quality of the sessions, hotel, conference functions, and social events. If you made it to St. Louis, you know what a superb conference it was and what a round of applause we owe Eric for coordinating and hosting such a fine event.

### NWCA Web Page

Bruce Pegg of Colgate University has set up a Web page for NWCA to use in providing information on NWCA and its services and also to make available information, news, and resources of interest to the writing center community. The NWCA Web page address is:

<http://ww2.colgate.edu/diw/NWCA.html>

The Web page is in its initial stages of operation and will be fully functional in January. Bruce asks everyone to take a look at the present set up and provide him with feedback. He also encourages anyone who wants to have information posted on the Web page to contact him at: [bpegg@center.colgate.edu](mailto:bpegg@center.colgate.edu)

As the Web page develops, Bruce has plans to connect us with other Web sites, so any writing centers or writing center organizations that have Web pages and would like to be linked with our Web page should also contact Bruce.

### NWCA Press

At NCTE, the Executive Board formally approved the establishment of the NWCA Press that will publish books and monographs on writing center theory and practice. Byron L. Stay will serve as the Director of NWCA Press. The President of NWCA (Christina Murphy) will serve on the Editorial Board for one year and the First Vice President (Joan Mullin) will serve for two years. Other members of the Editorial Board will serve staggered terms of one, two, or three years.

The current members of the Editorial Board are:

- Pamela Childers  
The McCallie School
- Lisa Ede  
Oregon State University
- Muriel Harris  
Purdue University
- Cynthia Haynes  
University of Texas at Dallas
- Dave Healy  
University of Minnesota
- Stephen M. North  
SUNY—Albany
- Michael Pemberton  
University of Illinois
- David Russell  
Iowa State University

Anyone interested in submitting a proposal to have a work considered for publication by NWCA Press should contact:

Byron Stay, Director  
NWCA Press  
Mount Saint Mary's College  
Emmitsburg MD 21727  
(301) 447-6122  
[stay@msmary.edu](mailto:stay@msmary.edu)

### Report on NCTE Workshop

The NWCA workshop at NCTE was on "Tutoring and Writing Pedagogy: Philosophies and Paradigms." Christina Murphy and Joan Mullin served as Chair and Associate Chair of the workshop. The workshop leaders and their topics were:

- Tom Bateman, Calvert Hall College High School  
"Setting Up and Administering a Tutoring Program"
- Bob Barnett, University of Michigan—Flint  
"Tutor Training Programs"
- Joe Law, Texas Christian University  
"Models of the Tutoring Process"
- Steve Sherwood, Texas Christian University  
"Ethical Issues in Tutoring"

(cont. on page 5)

# WRITING CENTER ETHICS

## How collaborative are take-home exams?

As the fall semester draws to a close, my tutors and I now find ourselves wrestling with a curious ethical dilemma that we've never really had to confront before. For the first time in the five years that our writing center has been open for business, students are now beginning to bring in take-home exams and ask us for help in composing their responses. The idea of helping students with examinations makes several of my tutors very uncomfortable, and more than one of our recent TA meetings have been devoted to the question, "Is it ethical to help these students at all, and if so, how?"

We have yet to come up with a definitive answer or explicit policy in response. In general, the positions taken by various tutors at various times have fallen into one of two camps.

Camp one: take-home midterms and take-home exams are really no different from the kinds of writing assignments we normally handle in the writing center on a daily basis. Students are given writing assignments by their instructors. There are deadlines for completing these assignments. Students will be given grades based on how well they complete these assignments. Because the assignments are to be completed outside of class, instructors expect that students will take full advantage of all the resources available to them in writing their responses, including notes, course texts, reference materials, previous exams, and conversations with other people about the course and its subject matter. Aside from a few general dicta about students not "cheating" or "turning in work that is not their own" (academic sins that writ-

ing centers have consistently denied that they participate in), there are rarely any strictures that specifically prohibit students from discussing their work with anyone before they turn it in for a grade. Certainly, some students will share their responses with a roommate, a spouse, a relative, or another student in the same class, so why shouldn't they be able to share them with a consultant in the writing center?

Camp two: take-home midterms and take-home finals are significantly different from the kinds of writing that students typically bring into the writing center. True, students are given "assignments" to write on, and true, students are expected to make use of outside resources in composing their responses, but the nature of the assignments, the goals of the assignments, and the range of resources which are acceptable for use in a take-home exam are otherwise quite different from the papers we normally see. For one thing, the "assignments" in take-home exams are usually quite narrow in scope and are generally designed to elicit specific pieces of regurgitated information from class lectures and texts. Students may be asked to incorporate that information in written texts of their own creation, and they may indeed learn something in doing so, but *learning* is not the primary intent of examination assignments. *Individual performance* is. The goal of a take-home exam is not to encourage students to *create* knowledge or use writing as a tool for discovery as much as it is to have students *display* knowledge using writing as a tool for communication. Further, while instructors may be willing to concede that feed-

back, collaboration, and response from the writing center are important—even necessary—components of the writing process that should be utilized with research papers or other extended writing assignments, they would likely recoil in horror at the thought that students could receive this kind of assistance on answers to test questions. Why should the writing center invite faculty animosity by choosing to help students with their exams?

Camp one's rebuttal to camp two: First of all, what instructors think about our policy is, if not completely irrelevant, at least not directly our concern. Lots of instructors distrust what we do, so why should we worry about upsetting a few more as long as we can defend our actions? Second of all, the important point is this: writing center theory is not invested in the banking theory of knowledge. Students do not just "assimilate" facts and then objectively and impassively "display" them upon request. Knowledge is mediated through symbol systems such as language and, through language, is constantly being created and recreated. Whenever people make use of linguistic signs to communicate information, regardless of the context, they are constructing new knowledge for themselves as well as for others. Research paper. . . take-home exam. . . they are theoretically inseparable. And since writing center pedagogy is deeply immersed in this social theory of language, and since we see ourselves as active participants in the ongoing social dialogue that allows students to negotiate their own understandings of the world through texts, then we have every right to help

students no matter what the genre or circumstances.

Camp two's rebuttal to camp one: Theory, shmeory. Try talking about the socially constructed nature of texts in a plagiarism case. It won't get you very far. Like it or not, we work in institutions that have established certain practices, conventions, and regulations for conducting their business, and one of those practices is *individualized testing*. When students are given an examination, the presumption is that they will do the work by themselves, not in collaboration with others. When instructors give students take-home exams, those presumptions remain unchanged. We have a responsibility to respect these implicit instructor and institutional expectations and refuse to help students with take-home exams.

And so the discussion went. . . .

Some of the tutors maintained that they would help students with their writing no matter what kind of written assignment they brought in, some said that they would not help students with take-home exams under any circumstances, some said that they would help students with matters of expression but not of content, and some just plain didn't know what to do.

The more we talked about it, the more we realized how much we were floundering in uncharted waters. Some instructors might not have a problem with us helping students; others might object strenuously. Some departments might have explicit policies on the matter; others might not. Some tutors might have problems helping students no matter what the official college or departmental policy might be on the subject; others

might have no such qualms. Sometimes—as a frustrated student told one of my tutors—we might not even *know* we were working on an exam question unless the student let it slip.

So what to do? Initially, I engaged in a little fence-straddling, suggesting that tutors use their own discretion in these matters and only help students to the degree they felt comfortable. I didn't see anything *fundamentally* unethical with helping students write responses to exam questions, for the same reason that I didn't see anything fundamentally unethical with helping students to write any other kind of paper that gets turned in for a grade for one of their classes. As long as the tutors didn't take control of the response or add significant amounts of substance to it, then I didn't see an overwhelming cause for concern.

But the question of institutional responsibility kept nagging at me. I kept wondering what instructors and administrators would say if they *knew* we worked with students on take-home exams. Was I just sticking my head in the sand, trying to avoid making a decision until it became necessary to do so? (And I don't want to disparage that course of action as particularly irresponsible. One of the things I've discovered as an administrator is that sometimes problems DO go away if you judiciously ignore them for a while.) But two things happened in the center that subsequently forced me to confront the issue head-on: (1) some students, frustrated that the first consultant they visited refused to help them with their exams, just kept making appointments until they found someone who would, and (2) a graduate student came in to the center looking for help with one of his M.A. area exam questions.

If students are going to shop around for the tutors that are willing to help them, then my circumventing the issue just leads to appointment headaches and confusion for all parties concerned. Best to have some sort of uniform policy that all the tutors can adhere to so students will know that the response they get from one will be the same one they get from any of the others. If grad students are coming in with responses to questions that will, presumably, determine whether or not they receive an advanced degree, then the stakes of providing assistance become a lot higher, and the need to determine where we stand, ethically, becomes more critical and urgent as well.

What I intend to do—at least for a start—is survey department heads and a representative cross-section of instructors across campus and find out where they stand on this issue. By conducting a survey, I hope to learn more about departmental policies campuswide and also to discover whether I need to set a universal policy about take home exams or whether I am better served setting different policies for different departments or—though I shudder to think what it would entail—different instructors. In this case, I feel that my personal convictions about the ethics of writing center assistance must, at least temporarily, give way to my ethical responsibilities to other constituencies. With luck, I will be able to negotiate a suitable policy that satisfies me, placates campus faculty, works for students, and guides tutors in the writing center. I'll report back in a later column and let you know the results of the survey.

Michael A. Pemberton  
University of Illinois, Urbana-  
Champaign

## Wyoming Conference on English

Call for Papers  
Laramie, Wyoming  
June 18-21, 1996  
"Theory, Pedagogy, & Everyday Life"

Call for papers deadline is March 15, 1996. For more information, contact Kathy Evertz at 307-766-6486 or kevertz@uwoyo.edu. Conference information and updates may be accessed via the Internet at <http://www.uwoyo.edu/a&s/engl> (click on 1996 Wyoming Conference on English).

# The personality of body language

It may be that I have a split personality; although, I think it's more like an obsessive-but-not-compulsive disorder. It's a symptom that comes with being a double-major in writing and psychology. I'm obsessed with the relationship between personality types and how they affect writing styles. This obsession has become the focus of much research and thought and naturally carries over into my work as a writing tutor.

Research shows that personality traits orchestrate writing processes. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator often is used to match personality styles with specific compositional characteristics (see, for example, Jensen and DiTiberio, Fisher, Harris). Evidence points to a clear connection between personality types and writing processes. For example, when given a writing assignment, introverted personality types tend to plan extensively before they begin writing, while extroverted types usually free-write a quick draft in order to sort their thoughts. The link between personality and writing is of concern to writers and also to readers, including tutors, who respond to an author's work. Studies show that the more readers know about writers, the more they're able to help writers discover productive writing processes.

In *Personality and the Teaching of Composition*, Jensen and DiTiberio address the role of "evaluators of writing"—those who help writers identify and develop their unique writing process. Note that "evaluators" applies to the *process* of writing, not the writing itself. Jensen and DiTiberio warn that "without some understanding of how individuals develop as writers, we may help a student to perfect a particular text to the *neglect* [italics mine] of his or her long-range development" (105). Writing tutors, as evaluators of writing processes, certainly don't intend to hinder their students' writing development. And knowing

more about the students as writers would greatly enhance the tutoring process. Yet consider the complications writing tutors face as they attempt to understand personalities and writing styles.

First, there's the time limit. A 30- to 45-minute tutorial does not provide adequate opportunity to become acquainted with a personality. The tutorial must be devoted to the task at hand, which limits acquaintance much beyond initial introductions. Second, tutors don't have instructors' repetitive edge: reading one paper after another, watching students' personalities emerge throughout the semester. Tutors' efforts to become familiar with personalities are complicated by other variables, including a multitude of writing assignments to which each student reacts differently and, especially for first-timers, the likelihood of entering unfamiliar territory and feeling apprehensive. Students don't always know what to expect and neither do tutors.

Tutors often rely on body language to compensate for time restraints and other issues that hamper our ability to discover personalities behind students' papers. We monitor our own tutorial pulses, making certain our body language represents a willingness to work with students. And we attempt to interpret students' body language to gauge the progress of the tutorial. However, body language, for the most part, is only a concept: lacking hard-and-fast rules for translating its meaning introduces another problem. All language, including body language, is a source of communication. However, body language operates without the benefits of spoken or written symbols. The sole source behind successful communication via body language is the individual expressing it—the personality behind the body language. Indeed, body language surely must be as unique as the person using it to communicate.

I wondered how my fellow tutors dealt with the issue of decoding the individual personalities of body language and distributed a survey, asking them to describe their views of students' body language at work during tutorials. The responses I received revealed one common theme. All included some type of spatial reference, i.e., where (beside or across) or how (close in or leaning back) students sat. I decided to talk with some of the tutors about this spatial issue.

One tutor commented that he knew from the onset whether or not students would engage actively in tutorial sessions. I asked: "What do you mean by 'engage actively'?" "Well," went the reply, "if they scoot in close while we're going over the paper, that tells me they're willing to participate. If they, on the other hand, sit back away from the table, with an aloof attitude, you might as well hang it up because they're not gonna budge."

Another tutor told me about an experience where a student perched herself in the "sit-back" position at the beginning of the tutorial. Thus, by the above interpretation, this student did not intend to engage actively. But that was not the case. The tutor looked up after reading the paper and noticed the student crying. Interesting. Few could argue that tears don't demonstrate active engagement. (I couldn't help but wonder about the success of that tutorial if the tutor began by assuming the student's body language communicated non-engagement.)

Sit back. Sit close. Sit across. Sit beside. Yes, sometimes these positions are cues from the body's language—but not always, which takes my thoughts back to the personality issue. Detaching body language from the personality behind it can be dangerous. Interpreting body language aside from its personality is much like assigning a grade to a portfolio

based on a single, rough draft. Tutors need a framework that sketches meaning into the personality of students' body language and what truly is being communicated.

Nancy Fisher's study using the Myers-Briggs demonstrated that "[t]he more we know about personality type and its effect on student performance, the better we may be as instructors" (46). Jensen and DiTiberio agree: "Although teachers should not act like amateur psychologists, they should nonetheless acknowledge that they have a powerful impact on how students feel about themselves as people and writers" (116). Tutors are neither instructors nor teachers, *per se*; but we are evaluators of writing processes and must remain attuned to the personality of each writer we work with.

Myers and Briggs spent over twenty years analyzing piles and piles of data. In the end, they identified not one or two

or even three but *sixteen* basic personality types, which are qualified as dominant but not definitive. Tutors, unfortunately, work without the advantage of personality tests that provide insight into students' thoughts. We work with time limits that impede the opportunity to gain substantial knowledge about students' personalities.

To be sure, there exists similarities in the personalities underlying students' body language, and tutors quickly learn how to respond to the cues revealed by body language. Yet tutors must be careful to search for the person behind the language, both body and written, and avoid making assumptions at the onset of the tutorial. Where and how students sit remains circumstantial until their tutor can attach fair and appropriate meaning to what the body's language is communicating. Tutors should look for insight embedded in students' words in order to touch base with the personality behind

the language. Only then can tutors effectively incorporate it into their work with students.

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