

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 20, Number 8

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

April, 1996

## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

The stories we tell are powerful indeed. In this issue of the newsletter we hear Loretta Cobb's story of her journey, both metaphorical and real, and what she gained from her travels. (For those of us just returning from regional writing center conferences all around the country and from the Conference on College Composition and Communication, her story is particularly timely.) Jennifer Brice also explores what we hear in Phillip's account of his trip between two remote Alaskan villages and what we, as tutors, learn from this narrative. If you find insights and value in story-telling, I invite you to tell us your stories as well.

Pam Childers also invites you to respond, but with different information. On page 8 you'll find a form to fill out so that you can be included in the next edition of the Writing Center Directory she is compiling. If you know of other writing centers that should be listed, please copy and distribute this form. Yet again for this next edition, we all applaud Pam for this huge effort in creating such a useful directory of who and where we are.

• Muriel Harris, editor

## ...INSIDE...

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## Northern realities, northern literacies: The writing center in the "contact zone"

Recently, I tutored a Koyukon Athabaskan man in his early thirties who'd been assigned to write a five-page essay about a significant event in his life. I'll call him Phillip. His paper, an account of a snow machine trip between two remote Alaska villages, ran to an unruly twelve pages. The teacher had given it a B-, and Phillip wished to rewrite for a higher grade. So we met in the writing center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where 15 percent of the student body is Alaska Native, like Phillip, and 70 percent is white, like me.

Here, roughly one in ten writing center sessions takes place between a non-Native graduate student tutor and an Alaska Native undergraduate tutee. I've borrowed the term "contact zone" to describe these interactions, freighted as they are with three centuries of exploitation, colonialization, and repression of both Alaska Native languages and cultures. Mary Louise Pratt has described a contact zone as a "social space where cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asym-

metrical relations of power.” This definition means that virtually every writing center is a contact zone of sorts because of the perceived hierarchy of knowledge about what constitutes good writing. In a multicultural writing center such as the one at the University of Alaska, however, the importance of communicating clearly across lines of culture as well as hierarchy cannot be understated. Clear writing is almost always preceded by clear communication about writing. As tutors, we need to pay attention to

what we don’t say as well as what we do, and to how we say whatever we wish to say. Culture loads our gestures in ways we may not be aware of, but we can try to learn.

After thirty years in the Far North, I sometimes feel discouraged about how much I don’t know about my own home. Alaska’s vastness alone defies comprehension: it covers a territory of 378 million acres and stretches 1,400 miles from north to south. In the introduction to his 1914 memoir, *Ten Thousand Miles by Dog Sled*, Archdeacon Hudson Stuck writes that “Alaska is not one country but many countries . . . and what is true of one part of it is often grotesquely untrue of other parts.” The same can be said of Alaska’s diverse Native population. At the UAF Writing Center, we frequently see Inupiak and Yupik Eskimos as well as Athabaskan Indians from the northern, western and interior regions of the state, respectively. It would be a mistake to assume, however, that an Athabaskan Indian has more in common with another Athabaskan than with a Yupik or even a white student. The term “Athabaskan” refers not to a tribe but to a cluster of communicative patterns and cultural traditions rooted in Athabaskan life and languages, more than twenty of which are still in circulation today. The heterogeneity of northern cultures and northern literacies means that improving communication in the contact zone is not as simple as, say, memorizing the sixteen Yupik words for snow. Susan Blalock, director of the UAF Writing Center, teaches tutors to cultivate a sense of respect for difference: “While learning about particular cultures is very important, only the experience of ‘otherness’ will make us sufficiently attentive to the way students react to their assignments and to the tutors.”

One big difference between Phillip and myself is that I cannot imagine traveling by snow machine across several hundred miles of frozen tundra and rivers, trusting in the hospitality of strangers for a hot meal and a bed every other night or

so. His paper was organized chronologically, beginning not with the journey itself, but with Phillip’s idea of it, conceived years earlier during an airplane flight over the same terrain. The second section dealt with the purchase of a snow machine, choice of a partner, and other preparations. The journey comprised the third section, and the fourth was given over to thanking by name the friends and family members who fed, housed and entertained the travelers. The construction of a four-part narrative conformed to that of most Alaska Native folk tales. While many of these oral narratives have been recorded, translated and published in recent years, they haven’t attracted a widespread readership, even in Alaska. European folk tales, in contrast, tend to have only three parts: a beginning, middle and ending. Readers such as myself who were weaned on Hans Christian Andersen might find, on first reading, that a typical Alaska Native folk tale—or an essay such as Phillip’s—begins too early or ends too late.

In places, Phillip’s control over his material was strong, as when he described in harrowing detail the disorientation and fear brought on by a sudden snowstorm, and when he conveyed the laughter and goodwill of late-night storytelling sessions in the homes of people who, hours earlier, had been complete strangers. On the whole, however, the essay seemed sprawling, disjointed, peppered with usage errors, and, most seriously, lacking a central point or revelation. The crafting of a strong thesis statement is perhaps the greatest bugbear for all freshman writing students, but especially for Alaska Natives. Prohibitions against predicting the future, which is tantamount to bragging, characterize the social discourse of many northern cultures. “Unqualified assertions of personal ability and/or intent offend socially, and are considered egocentric and inept to the point of rudeness,” write anthropologists Patricia Kwatchka and Charlie Basham. Synonymous with assertions of personal ability and/or intent to prove a particular point, the thesis

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statement poses a Catch-22 for Alaska Native students: to write one is to disregard the teachings of their culture; not to write one is to disregard the teachings of their professors. Here is one area in which the writing center tutor may follow Mary Lou Pratt's advice, acting as a mediator or guide, outlining not only the expectations of the dominant culture but the ways in which such expectations may differ among members of the minority. In Phillip's case, I explained that his teacher probably expected a pithy sentence or two, somewhere near the beginning of the essay, hinting at the trials and lessons ahead. He was reluctant to compose such a statement, but I felt I had done my job.

Is the first-year graduate student who just traded Los Angeles for Fairbanks likely to be aware of cultural prohibitions against predicting the future of bragging? I doubt it, but she or he can learn. During the week-long tutor training every fall, new tutors and teaching assistants in the UAF English department visit the Rural Student Services center on campus. There, Native students show slides and talk about subsistence hunting and fishing, and what it's like to attend a one-room school in a village of several hundred people at most. The graduate students sample Native delicacies such as Eskimo ice cream (made with Crisco) or muktuk (slabs of whale blubber). During this experience, the lines of culture may become clearer while the lines of hierarchy get erased or even reversed. As writing center director Blalock points out, "The new tutors' first experience with Native students at this university is to learn from them rather than teach them."

It is one thing to recognize difference, another to communicate across the gulf that difference creates. In "Arts of the Contact Zone," Pratt identifies the need for ground rules "that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect." What follows are a few of the established ground rules at the UAF writing center for tutoring across lines of culture and

hierarchy. In some cases, the policies may be applicable to multicultural writing centers in general; in others, they may be specific to the northern contact zone. I've divided the ground rules into five categories: 1) create a "safe house"; 2) learn before you teach; 3) listen; 4) be polite; 5) negotiate.

### 1) Create a "safe house."

Situated in a different building from the English Department on the UAF campus, the Rural Student Services (RSS) center fits Pratt's definition of a "safe house," or a "social and intellectual [space] where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression." In contrast to the hushed environs of the main writing center, the RSS lounge is a vast common room with couches, a coffee machine, computers and adjoining counselors' offices. Here, amid the noisy current of conversations, ringing telephones and playing children, is an outpost of the writing center. The Connection has existed since 1991 in the form of a desk staffed by a single tutor for two hours every weekday afternoon. Because The Connection sits on the Native students' turf, so to speak, tutorials here tend to be more relaxed, spontaneous and informal than most sessions in the main writing center. Writing center statistics reveal that the number of appointments at RSS has risen steadily in the past four years, and anecdotal evidence points to greater numbers of rural students using both The Connection and the main writing center. (The evidence is anecdotal because, in the past, requests for information have contained questions only about students' linguistic background, not cultural background.)

Not every university that caters to students of many cultures has the equivalent of a Rural Student Services center, nor is it always practical in places that do to establish an outpost of the writing center there. Other ways to create a sympa-

thetic atmosphere might include decorating the walls with paintings by artists from other cultures, or posting notices in several languages. Offering all students coffee or popcorn makes them feel less like humble penitents and more like honored guests.

### 2) Learn before you teach.

As I mentioned earlier, constraints against predicting the future, speaking well of oneself, and speaking ill of another are prevalent among many Native Alaskans. Hypothesis is typically valued above assertion, indirection above forthrightness. For these reasons, direct questioning may be met with silence from members of a culture unaccustomed to our western, Socratic teaching tradition. Researchers observe that many cultural prohibitions among Alaska Natives transcend mere convention: if the rules for interpersonal communication are upheld, a delicate balance between humans and the natural world is maintained.

If we tutors set ourselves the task of learning before teaching, we can let our learning inform our tutoring sessions. For instance, as a writing technique, indirection is not highly valued by the dominant culture in America; as a tutoring technique, it's highly underrated. We could do worse than to remember that indirect criticism—that is, criticism leveled at a thing rather than a person—is less threatening or invasive than direct criticism. For instance, instead of saying "You seem to have trouble with sentence boundaries," we could say, "Comma splices tend to happen when a writer gets swept up in the enthusiasm of good ideas."

### 3) Listen.

Remember the stereotype of the silent Native and garrulous white? Studies have documented that Athabaskans pause roughly half again as long as whites between statements. Non-native people tend to be uncomfortable with what they perceive as over-long silences,

so they rush to fill in the gaps, usually just about the time the Native with whom they are conversing opens his or her mouth to speak. Ann LeFavor, a graduate student tutor in the writing center, once chided a colleague who worked with her in an alcohol treatment facility for being overly talkative around Alaska Natives. "Henry," she told him, laughing, "You're just *too white*." The punch line is that Henry is black.

When she works with Alaska Natives in the writing center, LeFavor says she finds herself doing a lot more listening, a lot of exploring, a lot of validation: "It works better if they verbalize [what they need help with]. You have to wait a lot longer than you think. If they're not going to tell you anything, they'll let you know that, too."

#### 4) Be polite.

Sounds easy, right? But politeness varies among cultures. What constitutes good manners among English teachers at a national conference is not, and should not be, the same as what constitutes good manners in the contact zone. Linguists Ron and Suzanne Scollon have isolated two forms of politeness: the first, "solidarity politeness" emphasizes what two speakers have in common and assumes little social or power difference between them; the second, "deference" politeness, is based on the premise that all communication is difficult and problematical. Deference politeness respects autonomy and self-determination and avoids, at all costs, imposition. Deference politeness does not presume to know what another person wants, thinks or needs. The Scollons' point is that instead of trying to draw out a quiet Alaska Native student, teachers should answer reticence with reticence.

#### 5) Negotiate.

Here is where the adept tutor can array the materials of the dominant culture and allow the student to select and invent

from what is available, acting as a guide in a process that Pratt describes as "transculturation." Phillip and I worked from the bottom up—from lower- to higher-order concerns—instead of the reverse. I was impressed with his use of Athabaskan words in parentheses when the English equivalents struck him as inadequate, and I told him so. We made quick work of mechanical errors, but when we touched on structure and content, Phillip's attitude subtly changed. He became an advocate for sections that I recommended condensing or cutting altogether.

When I observed in passing that the journey was at the heart of the essay, he interrupted me, saying his true subject was the people he met along the way. Instead of identifying individual qualities of perseverance or strength, which might be interpreted as bragging, he wished to celebrate the hospitality of an extended community. Aha! I thought: here's his thesis. I suggested he frontload some of this information, which, in the essay's present form, appeared near the end. While reluctant to reveal at the beginning of his essay the lessons he'd learned by the end of his journey, Phillip was willing to compromise. He crafted a sentence expressing curiosity about relatives he'd never met, and whom he expected to visit along the way.

As I read about Alaska Native culture and communication as background for this article, it occurred to me that much of what I learned could be put into action in the writing center. For instance, what if we tutors were to incorporate some of the prohibitions of which Phillip seemed mindful into our writing center philosophy? What if we avoided speaking too highly of ourselves, putting others down, and predicting the future? (After all, one of the luxuries of being the tutor rather than the instructor is not having to concern oneself overly with the grade a paper is likely to receive.) In the student-oriented writing center, we measure our success largely on the basis of atten-

dance, especially return attendance. Therefore we like to make students feel welcome before, during and after their sessions, often following them to the door to say, "Good-bye. Come again soon." In my case, no amount of research into other cultures can erase the habits of a lifetime. Believing that Phillip and I had established some rapport during our half-hour together, I was stricken when he walked out of the writing center without a backward glance. Then I remembered: to promise to return might have seemed tantamount to tempting fate. After some thought, I decided I could live with this explanation.

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# One flew out of the cuckoo's nest

It was a cold gray day in Michigan as the Greyhound headed toward the National Conference for Peer Tutors in Writing. I gazed out the window as I had since I left Birmingham, feeling nostalgic for my childhood, my lost idealism, my once hopeful heart for the future of writing centers. Somehow this experience seemed a metaphor for my career—what it has come down to. My university was one of the few places in the country that still did not have e-mail, so the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and the *Writing Center Journal* were my only contact with the outside world besides professional meetings. Now, my travel budget had been cut. Sure, that happens to everybody, but my travel privileges meant a lifeline to me. Being encouraged to stay active professionally through travel was one of the few first-class signals I had ever received from. . . well, let's just call it. . . the Combine.

"Obviously, I have not lost all my idealism," I thought as I watched the snow fall on lovely lakeside villages. It was breathtaking, just as I'd consoled myself that it would be if it snowed. Most Southerners know better than to idealize snow; we are neither trained nor equipped for it. I, however, would walk 100 miles just to see it. Not being totally unrealistic, I at least knew better than to drive alone in such weather, but I was determined with a strange ferocity to get to this conference because I had been approached about coordinating the next conference in the South. When my driving partner backed out at the last minute, my only recourse was to take the bus. By train, I'd have had to go to Washington and back through Louisiana. By plane, the cost was out of the question.

Well, maybe all good Democrats—at least all good writing center people—

should be forced to take a bus once a year. The ride, the passengers, the neighborhoods we drove through, put me back in touch with some important realizations.

Little children who hurry off to school on Chicago's 95th Street still look hopeful, determined. They are not so different from little girls in Birmingham who walked six blocks through an all-black neighborhood to get to an all-white school in 1958. During those years, I had my idealism beaten into me as I, at 13, watched ugly men filled with hatred beat the Reverend Shuttlesworth and frighten his children when his daughters attempted to integrate my elementary school. I felt those blows in my heart, and I vowed to do my part to make the world a better place.

I could see my face reflected in the window now: a gray ghost. I could also see reflected a ghost of myself years ago, playing in the yard and looking up to see Greyhound buses headed for what seemed like exotic places—Chicago, New York, New Orleans—and now I was on the other side of the window at 50. . . looking back.

For the purpose of this writing, I'll limit my reflections to my career as a writing center director. My first teaching appointment was in a three-room schoolhouse where, for one semester, I taught third and fourth graders from an old mining village some years after the mines had been closed; the area was, at least, depressed. Next, after serving my time in the trenches during the first seven years of integration in Alabama as a junior high English teacher, I found myself accepting a part-time job in 1975 after my daughter was born. I established a study skills program and a tutoring ser-

vice that grew into the Writing Center at the University of Montevallo, just south of Birmingham.

Last year reading Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* I felt, once again, a kind of angst that I had never tried to tell my story. I also felt gratitude to men like Rose who tell the truth and give the rest of us that perspective that comes with knowing we are not alone. I could see his rebelliousness in dropping out of graduate school and entering the Teachers Corps. I think the same kind of feistiness sent me all the way to Bread Loaf when I could have simply walked across the street to get a Master's. Unfortunately, this was before financial assistance was offered to rural teachers, but I treasure my quality instruction there and the nurturing of independent thinking I received.

The same independence led me to think I could have a meaningful career without a doctorate. I was led to believe such foolishness by the Combine that wanted me to work cheaply, that convinced me that I would not have the time because I was already working 12-hour days and trying to be a good wife and mother too.

Ironically, that same Combine punished me as often as possible for not having a Ph.D. Though I always received excellent evaluations, I was often moved from faculty to staff categories for various committees, on salary sheets, on vacation records, etc. After a decade or so (I was a very slow learner), I began to notice a pattern: the moves were never in my favor. They were always in the Combine's favor.

Probably the most critical shuffling act of all involved my salary. Once, after I

had offended the Combine by hiring a rebellious tutor who had written a nasty editorial, I was called in and pronounced STAFF after a dozen or so years of being Faculty/Staff. On this occasion, however, faculty were receiving a 4% higher raise; thus, my status was changed after a seemingly whimsical decision by the Combine. (The reader must keep in mind that after almost 30 years in the profession, I was making less than \$30,000 a year.) The next year, I went to the Combine and said "O. K., I'm staff and I have the lowest salary for my years' experience on record." The Combine countered with, "but, my dear, you are *so* closely associated with the English Department, and we are not giving any faculty raises until the faculty salary study is completed." It gets worse, but the details of life in the gray zone bore even me, the ancient Mariner.

So, back to last year and my plans to host a conference. Feeling really burned out, I was reading Rose to get psyched up. I decided to invite him as a speaker at the Conference. He had to decline, but during our conversation he advised me to write my own story. . . perhaps as a series of reflections for the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Maybe you have to *be there* to know how connected such conversations can make those of us who are so isolated feel.

When I called Muriel Harris about the idea, she was, as always, encouraging. We agreed to meet and talk more after her keynote speech at the first national meeting of writing center directors, sponsored by the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA). The day I was to leave, my husband had emergency surgery. Unfortunately, I missed the first NWCA Conference—that moment in our collective history—though I had campaigned for such unification for years.

I wanted to write about the middle-aged women like Harris and like me who abound in writing center circles. (I am not being sexist; I just know that women did outnumber men in writing centers in

the 70's.) I thought a focus on Harris's keynote address at this historic national meeting would be perfect as an example of the women who started the whole idea of writing centers. Recently, for example, I was visiting at Loyola in New Orleans and I was told that Kate Addams would be coming to meet me because "she was the one who got the writing across the curriculum stuff going, though she's moved on to something else now." When we did meet, it was like a reunion since she and I knew and had been encouraged by many of the same people (many of our mentors were men, I might add) as we struggled to establish writing centers in the conservative South. There is almost always such a person as Kate connected with the writing center, usually someone of tireless energy and great enthusiasm. . . at least at first.

I had also noticed at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Cincinnati back in 1992 when Wilkie Leath and I gave a party for the folks at the Writing Center Pre-conference Workshop that most of the folks who came out were—surprisingly—men in their early thirties. Ah! Something new was happening. Computers. Administrators. Not just nurturing teachers. The most exciting thing I discovered was that these nice young men seemed to feel no need to throw the old ladies out with the bath water. Instead, they had a respect for us and for the way we had pioneered this wing of the profession.

I continue to see men and women working together to make better and better programs. Just today, I read Stephen North's "Revisiting 'The Idea of a Writing Center.'" What courage it takes to re-examine one's words from the early 80's. (I shudder now to remember how I actually boasted in *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration* about the cost-effective solution I had found in peer tutors, assuring myself and the world that a peer tutoring staff would keep us all young and eager forever. Actually, I wasn't quite that foolish.) Just as North did, I saw things through a glass differently in those days. Surely, at

this point there are those who want to hear from us veterans: where we are, where we are going. In North's case, he is moving into a challenging new program at Albany. All of us must watch that program as a possible model.

Undoubtedly, it helps North to have a colleague like Lil Brannon in the same town. I met North at our first regional meeting of Southeast Writing Centers Association (SWCA) in the early 80's when he was the keynote speaker; I met Brannon at my last official SWCA Conference in '94. Having followed their contributions to our profession over the years, I felt somehow completed by beginning and ending my professional experience with such speakers. I regret that women like Brannon and Lillian Bridwell-Bowles (the keynote speaker at the conference for peer tutors I directed the next month) were not in their present positions when I started. I would walk 200 miles in snow to study with them at 30. However, I simply cannot find the enthusiasm to start over at 50, especially not after so many frustrations and disappointments.

Perhaps my travel privileges actually caused me more grief than good, and I never should have had them in the first place. Then I would have stayed in my place all along. I have always feared that my aspirations for our program at the University of Montevallo were simply too high. I am still looking for the part of NO that I can understand. One of my colleagues often reminds me, "Don't try to make a silk purse from a sow's ear." Since I was a poor little inner-city urchin who went off to Bread Loaf and studied with the best of them—from Stanford to Smith and from Princeton to Oxford—managing to hold my own, I've just never doubted that my tutors and I learn from contact with folks from private and/or "better" schools. Maybe the only privilege I had that was in line with theirs was my travel budget. As long as I was an officer or presenting, I could go anywhere within reason. Still, I tried to keep my trips comparable to my colleagues on my own campus. What's fair

is fair. . . well, sorta. . . unless the Combine is involved.

We must tell our stories, fellow and sister veterans. Especially important are the stories of the casualties of the profession. For example, why shouldn't new directors benefit from this incident: In 1985, I was asked to study the effect of word-processing on composition. I could see right away that it was a must for our program—not just the writing center, the whole writing program. After many frustrating years and endless committee meetings, in 1990, my worst nightmare came true. I always said that the Combine would bring in a whole new component of our operation and give us no increase in staff to deal with the expansion. It happened. We got a room full of computers that were new and in constant need of maintenance. We expanded our hours of operation by 70 hours, yet we were only increasing our staff by expanding a part-time master tutor's schedule into one of those infamous composites: half master tutor + one half computer coordinator = the Combine's idea of two full time people.

There was no increase in our student staff that year either, so both of us "composites" and our tutors simply worked night and day—committed as we were to the need for the new technology. Believe it or not, we actually rounded up volunteers and added some work-study the next year and had a decent operation underway, modeled in part by suggestions from Cynthia Selfe at a National Writing Project Workshop. However, the Combine had a whim and appointed several new males to oversee the operation of a computer support specialist in the computer center who knows nothing about our writing program and is located in another building. Nonetheless, without being consulted, we were informed that we would be getting new and better computers. The tutors were upset. They knew their classmates were losing an ambiance that nurtured writers.

Furthermore, all members of the English Department that year got new com-

puters for their desks. . . except the writing center director (+ teacher of two freshman courses) and the computer software coordinator one quarter time (+ master tutor one quarter time + teacher of two freshman sections). We, of all people, did not have access to the new computers. We didn't even, of all things, have *one* in the writing center.

But this is not about John Lennon  
And this is not a poem.  
(apologies to Nikki Giovanni)

This is about the National Conference for Peer Tutors in Writing and how that breath of fresh air saved my life that fall. I am sure you can smell the ashes from the burnout I experienced; in fact, the air around me was acrid but my soul is intact. One of the main reasons for this survival is that I began every work day writing or calling people about the upcoming conference. Not just ordinary people, but happy, dedicated souls who were not all young men in their thirties but middle aged women as well—who have not burned out, who may never give up. They were excited about the conference and the opportunities to learn from each other. They approached their work seriously and with professional commitment. We were all infused by the energy and goodness of peer tutors, and it was good.

When the bus pulled into the station in Grand Rapids in 1993, I had just finished reading the NWCA Award for Excellence essay in the *Writing Center Journal*. When we rode through Oxford, Mississippi, on the way home, I thought of Faulkner and my own freshman year. There could be worse fates than to go back to the simple love of literature and the wonder of a grandson. I guess I'll always be an idealist of some sort, but never a politician.

*\*\*Further news flash: fall, 1995: The new director is doing very well in the writing center at the University of Montevallo since she has already been given an increased student staff due to a*

3/4 teaching load. She is bright, fresh, eager, etc. Most importantly, she is respected because she is a Ph. D. in a tenure-track position. At this point, I'm proud of what I founded and delighted to see it running well under fresher directing. Perhaps there is a happy ending in here somewhere.

Loretta Cobb  
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## Minimizing barriers

(continued from page 10)

enthusiasm and actively engaged in the process of learning about writing.

Although the lecturing instructors and their students eventually developed positive working relationships, writing center tutors cannot spend an entire semester in the classroom with a given student. We must establish rapport with a student—often a stranger—in an expedient manner. Sitting beside the student provides the optimal beginning.

The physical positioning of tutor next to student accomplishes more than indicating the tutor's interest in the student and her writing; more than reducing the opportunity for the tutor to appropriate the student's work; more than encouraging the student to actively participate in the tutorial. Working side-by-side, student and tutor become equal. That unspoken equality removes the power, the pedestal, the position of superiority, and places the tutor on the exact level as the student requesting assistance. Establishing rapport becomes a simpler task, and the potential for an effective, enlightening tutorial—rather than a lecture—increases.

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# Writing Center Directory

Below is the National Writing Centers Association directory form to be published in the next edition of the National Directory of Writing Centers. If you wish to be listed, fax or mail the appropriate information on the form to Pam Childers at:

e-mail: pfarrellch@aol.com (or) pchilder@mccallie.chattanooga.tn.us  
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State \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Center \_\_\_\_\_

School Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number/fax/email \_\_\_\_\_

Academic Level \_\_\_\_\_

Web Page Address \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Person/Title \_\_\_\_\_

Department Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

Director Reports to: \_\_\_\_\_

Associated with (Check all that apply):

\_\_\_\_\_ WAC    \_\_\_\_\_ Fac. Dev.    \_\_\_\_\_ Dev. Ed    \_\_\_\_\_ ESL    \_\_\_\_\_ Other (Specify on this line)

Center's Age \_\_\_\_\_

Center Purpose \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Hours Open \_\_\_\_\_ Staff \_\_\_\_\_

Unique Characteristics \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



# TUTORS' COLUMN

## The writing center mirror

10:30 a.m. Time to go over to the writing center. I wheeled back in my roller-chair, happy to distance myself from the computer terminal. For over three hours I had been sitting, attempting to revise a story for a fiction writing class. After saving a few minute changes in my document, I turned off the terminal with a small amount of relief. My own writing troubles seemed hopeless, and as I gathered my books and papers, I wondered about my own ability as a writing consultant.

Walking to the writing center, I couldn't help thinking about the story I was working on. Just the day before I had met with my fiction professor for a half-hour conference on my progress as a writer. He leaned forward in his chair, intently watching me as I read my story aloud. During particular passages that he liked, he nodded his head in appreciation, waiting until the end to make any specific comments. I often modeled my own responses in the writing center after what I learned from this professor. Imagine my surprise when I paused for a breath and noticed his eyes wandering. He was not giving me his regular keen attention. Stuttering on with my story, I read on. The last few pages seemed to stretch on forever as my professor's boredom became more apparent. My first impulse prompted me to feel cheated and ignored. How could one of my favorite teachers blow me off like this? But I knew better. If he was bored, only my writing could be blamed.

That experience yesterday had caused my three-hour "revise-a-thon," and I still hadn't discovered the source of my rhetorical wasteland. My characters were well developed, and the dialogue flowed

smoothly. The descriptions were observant and yet not overbearing. I had put my best into this story, and it still did not work. Something was missing.

I finally arrived at the writing center as a writer gone bad. Low on self confidence, I tried every dirty trick I knew to avoid conferencing with any students. Normally, I enjoy working with other students and their writing, but my own writing problems intimidated me. Helping someone else with writing suddenly seemed impossible. My own imperfection overshadowed my work as a writing consultant. After referring several students to my fellow writing consultants who were on duty, I hid myself away at a corner table to look over a draft of my story. What was wrong? Could I salvage anything from this, or should I . . .

"Excuse me."

"Huh?" I raised my eyes. A young woman stood at my table with a handful of freshly printed pages.

"Are you a tutor? I saw you talking to those other tutors."

"Yes, I'm a writing consultant, but you may want to talk to another consultant."

"They are all busy," she informed me. "Could you look over this for me, please. It's important."

"Of course," I said and then apologized for not making myself more available. She sat down at the table and explained she was working on a personal essay for an English 101 class. We chatted for a minute, helping both of us relax a bit. Her name was Zoey, and she had

taken AP English in high school but never bothered to take the CLEP exam. She felt she was a competent writer; however, she admitted having some trouble with her current assignment.

"This paper is due at the end of the week and I don't know what to do to fix it. Could you look at it and tell me what you think?"

"Okay, is there anything you want me to look for in specific? Any questions?"

"I don't know. I have been working on this over and over again but I just can't seem to get it right." She rolled her eyes. "Maybe it's hopeless."

I couldn't help chuckling. "I know how you feel," I answered. "Well, let's get started and see what the two of us can do."

She started reading her essay to me. I was surprised. Her writing was clear and concise. She wrote about her involvement in the California State Gymnastic Finals. She described each event with clarity. Her emotions were evident without her ever needing to directly mention them. This isn't so bad, I thought to myself. I wondered what Zoey was so worried about.

Then my mind wandered. Only for a moment, but it wandered. I quickly focused myself back on her essay just as she finished reading. I sat nodding my head, hoping she didn't notice my momentary lapse. From recent experience, I knew how much a bored reader/responder could hurt.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"May I take a look?" I took her essay and browsed through it. Her writing read well. Zoey never strayed from her topic and her grammar seemed almost flawless. Nevertheless, something was missing. I realized we both had a common problem.

"What do you think?" she asked again.

"I'm not sure. Your writing is great. Your topic appears clear, but something is missing."

"I knew it," she said. "What is missing?"

"I don't know."

Zoey remained quiet and sat still as if to say, "You're the writing consultant. You are supposed to help me, so you had better come up with something quick." I fidgeted with the pages of her essay. My eyes darted from paragraph to paragraph looking for one fatal flaw. Then I could simply suggest cutting out a section, and everything would be magically fixed. We both knew better.

"Should I just start over?" she sincerely asked.

"No. I think what you have here is good. Let's work with it some more." I was determined. This had become a crusade for both of us. "Do you mind if we read over it once more?" I requested.

We read over it once more. Her content was well organized. She went to a gymnastic competition. She competed in each event. She performed well and ultimately won the gold medal. As a result she felt proud that she had accomplished such a noteworthy achievement. End of the essay. It seemed simple enough.

We talked a little more as I went over and over the facts in my head. The only real clue I could work with was my previous distraction towards the middle of the essay. Something lost my interest just as something in my own story had lost the interest of my fiction professor.

Why does one become bored? It seemed like a general but very important question.

I remembered a comedy I once watched on television. The entire episode consisted of the characters constantly complaining of their extreme boredom while extraordinary things happened all around them without any recognition. They never noticed all the interesting things right within their own reach. Then I understood the problem in both mine and Zoey's writing. We were acutely observing events all around us, and yet we were failing to note the extraordinary things that make life interesting. It was a basic writing precept that could be summed up in one word.

"Conflict," I said.

"What do you mean, conflict?" Zoey asked. She examined her paper, looking for the word in her writing.

"Conflict," I repeated. "That's what keeps your reader involved in your writing. What we need to work on is putting conflict in our own work so people will be curious and keep reading."

Zoey looked puzzled, surprised at my inclusive "we." At that moment, I was tempted to show her my own story and see what she had to say. I resisted. She was in the writing center for some response on her own writing. I didn't need to trouble her with my story.

We continued for a little while longer, thinking of ideas together for her essay. As topics of conflict, we discussed fear of failure, a gymnastic rival, or a combination of both. Our conference was working.

Finally, Zoey excused herself. "I better get going. I want to get writing before I forget everything."

"I understand," I said, pulling out my own story.

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## Minimizing barriers

Tutors in the Indiana University - Purdue University at Indianapolis Writing Center are instructed to sit next to their student during a tutorial, rather than across the table. As a student tutor for IUPUI, I routinely adhere to this mandate. However, I didn't assimilate the importance of tutorial seating arrangements until the day a student sat at the end of the table instead of beside me. As I attempted to curl my chair around the corner of the table so we could simultaneously examine her essay, I became acutely aware of how easily I could establish a connection when sitting next to a student, and I floundered in discomfort stemming from our seating arrangement. I felt as though she and I were cognitively, as well as physically, separate. In addition, while I internally reminded myself to engage the student in discussion, I kept catching myself delivering a lecture.

Never again. The table loomed as a barrier between my student and myself, and adversely affected the resulting tutorial. I realized in order to help a student improve her essay, I must first minimize any barriers.

My training as a writing center tutor included the task of observing several writing classes. During observations I conducted early in the semester, I noticed certain instructors lectured from behind the podium or desk, while others physically sat with their class in a collaborative manner.

When the instructor remained behind the desk or podium in a position of authority, class response suffered. Lecturers attempting to initiate student discussion often received an uncomfortable silence, and when the students broke into groups, limited, stilted conversation ensued. Conversely, in the classrooms of the instructors who seated themselves with their class, the students displayed

*(continued on page 7)*

# WRITING CENTER ETHICS

## How collaborative are take-home exams?: Part II

The polls have closed, the votes have been counted, and the tallies suggest some fascinating—and rather unexpected—shifts in public opinion among the electorate.

No, I'm not talking about the recent spate of Republican primaries. I'm talking about my own recent survey of faculty across campus at the University of Illinois. As you may recall, a few months ago I wrote a column about the difficulties my consultants and I were having, trying to decide how we should handle students who bring take-home exam assignments into the writing center. Some of the consultants felt quite strongly that take-home exam essays are really no different from any other type of academic papers that students bring in for conferences, while a number of other consultants felt that the two genres are really quite different in form, goals, and instructional intent and deserved to be handled differently by the tutorial staff. My own point of view on the issue wavered back and forth between the two positions, as I felt that both sides had arguments of equal merit, but I also realized that any decision I made would ultimately have to be informed not only by my consultants' stances but also by the opinions of the faculty members whose students would be taking the exams in question. So, between that first column and this one, I—with the help and advice of my consultants—put together a two page survey on the issue and sent it out to approximately 830 faculty members across campus, trying to sample a representative number of department heads, full professors, associate professors, assistant professors, and teaching assistants in each of the 84 departments that currently exist in 11 colleges at the U of I.

The complete results of this survey are far too many and too detailed to be summarized in this column and will have to be published in full in another venue, but I can give a picture of some of the more interesting results, share some of the more revealing comments from instructors, and talk a bit about the writing center policy which I ultimately decided upon as a consequence.

My initial hypothesis was that the overwhelming majority of faculty responses would be firmly opposed to the concept of writing center consultants working with students on take-home exam essays. I expected that my own misgivings about exam conferences would only be magnified when filtered through the lens of faculty who had not been trained in the principles of collaborative learning, the writing process, or the socially constructed nature of disciplinary knowledge and language practices. Surprisingly, this did not prove to be the case. Quite the contrary, a majority of the respondents stated that they would have few objections to their students working with writing center tutors on exam essays. In raw numbers, of the 187 survey responses I received (approximately 23% of the total number distributed), 75 instructors (40%) said they had no objections to their students working on take-home exams in the writing center, 37 (20%) said they had some reservations about the practice (mostly depending on the kind and extent of help that was provided), and only 64 (34%) said that they would not want consultants helping their students with take-home exams under any circumstances. This same basic ratio held true no matter how often the faculty members gave take home exams (if at all), no mat-

ter which academic department or college they came from, and no matter what their academic rank. [The 6% unaccounted for in the above figures represent respondents who returned the survey saying they never gave take-home exams and didn't bother to answer any of the other questions.]

A few sample comments from the survey will illustrate, I think, some of the typical reasons offered by faculty to explain and justify their opinions. Those who had no objections expressed views generally similar to these:

An associate professor in civil engineering: "I support student collaboration and problem solving in groups. I also support a student's initiative to utilize resources such as the Writers' Workshop. If I were to give a take-home exam, I would structure it such that all resources outside of the classroom could be appropriately used."

An associate professor in mechanical and industrial engineering: "The Writers Workshop cannot do much regarding subject content and level of understanding of technical aspects of the assignment. How one presents that material, organizes an argument, or states recommendations and conclusions is where the Workshop can help, but that is not done in a vacuum. To be effective you must also have student input and the better their understanding the better the interaction with the Workshop and the better the final result."

Many of these faculty saw take-home exam essays as learning experiences, not

merely assessment vehicles, and encouraged their students to take advantage of whatever resources were available—up to and including the writing center. So long as the tutors did not go out of their way to provide content or take a too-active hand in what the students were writing, they saw the writing center as an important tool and, ultimately, a benefit to themselves as well. As one professor from the department of advertising put it, “I expect students’ papers to reflect their own understanding of the material. If they can be helped expressing that understanding I would be grateful.” “Besides,” said an assistant professor in civil engineering, “Why should all the learning come exclusively from me?”

But lest we be lulled into a false sense of complacency, the survey also revealed that a number of staunch current-traditionalists still haunt the halls of academe, faculty members who—surprise, surprise—not only express horror that we might be helping students with exams, but who also recoil in shock at the thought that we might be helping students write any other sort of assignment as well.

Note, for example this response from an associate professor of plant biology: “They should NOT ‘assist’ students in this. Am I missing something? Isn’t that OBVIOUS!?? This is a UNIVERSITY not KINDERGARTEN!!! (Thanks though. I’d never heard of the Writers’ Workshop before. So you are legitimized cheating! Great!)”

Or think about this comment from a professor of business administration: “I would prefer students used the Writers’ Workshop to help them understand what was wrong with *previously* evaluated work. It could be used to help them assess and rework for practice, and to improve *next* time. No help should be given for current assignments.”

Or, finally, consider what an associate professor in the school of social work had to say: “Students should work with Workshop consultants on improving writing skills in general, not in complet-

ing any specific assignment, whether it is a take-home exam *or a paper, or other type of writing assignment.*” [my emphasis]

A later question on the survey form asked respondents to suggest what they thought our policy should be in the writing center toward take-home exams. In addition to a flurry of, “Don’t talk about them’s” and “Hands off’s!” (and an equal number of “Treat them like any other paper’s”) quite a few of the responses suggested that the writing center might try to secure prior approval from instructors before agreeing to work on these type of assignments. Though I was not particularly enamored of this sort of policy, I thought that it made some sense in terms of mollifying faculty concerns, and I suggested it as an option at a recent meeting with my consultants.

And I nearly got my head bitten off.

Well, it wasn’t quite that bad, I suppose, but the reaction was pretty strong, and after listening to my consultants’ arguments for a while, I finally had to agree with them. In essence, the case they made went more or less like this: (1) We are not the campus essay police. It is not our responsibility to certify whether or not an instructor has given approval to his or her students, allowing them to use the writing center. We promote ourselves as being available to “all students working on any written project at any stage of the writing process,” and we should live up to that credo. (2) If students don’t specifically inform us that their paper is written in response to a take-home exam question, we’ll probably never know it anyway, so a restrictive policy would likely have only a limited effect. (3) Trying to get approval from instructors by phone at the time a student comes into the writing center is bound to be impossible and would only result in a *de facto* policy of refusing to work with take-home exam essays as a general rule. (4) And most importantly, the survey results provide clear evidence that a substantial proportion of faculty on campus either encourage their students

to take advantage of the writing center when writing their exam responses or have no objections to students doing so on their own. Why then should we impose restrictions on *all* students and *all* faculty in *all* classes merely because some faculty object?

The more I thought about this stance, the more it made sense to me. When faculty give their students take-home exams, it is the instructor’s responsibility to inform students which resources are acceptable and which are not, to set the guidelines that determine how students are to complete their exams and with whom they can discuss their responses, if anyone. Students—with complete justification—are right to operate under the assumption that whatever is not specifically prohibited by an assignment is allowed, and writing centers, too, should operate under a similar assumption. If an instructor does not say in class or write on the assignment sheet, “You are not to share or discuss your answers with anyone (including tutors in the writing center),” then as far as I’m concerned, the door is left open. This is not to say that students might not be running some risk when bringing in their papers; several of the faculty respondents indicated that even though they don’t specify what resources their students can and can’t use, they nevertheless “expect their students to know” what constitutes unfair assistance regardless and would fail those students who were “caught using the writing center.” I think such students would have a good case to protest any failing grades they received, and I think I might even be willing to support them in a grade dispute case, but rather than dwell on what might be the worst that *can* happen, I’ll focus instead on the best that *has* happened: a reaffirmation from a majority of faculty across campus that the writing center is a worthwhile, useful, and generally ethical site for student learning on campus.

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# Creating opportunities to talk with business faculty about writing

When most of us think of faculty development, we tend to think of formal activities such as workshops and individual consultation with professors. However, in reality, faculty development can occur in many forms. Anytime we have meaningful conversations with professors about writing or writing instruction, faculty development can occur. These engagements do not have to be called "faculty development" or "consultation." Indeed, my experience is that some of the best "faculty development" occurs both in informal and indirect situations.

Given this broader definition of faculty development, writing labs are natural campus centers for faculty development activities. We have contact with professors across campus, we frequently see the impact of their assignments and grading methods on their students, and we frequently talk to professors about their students' writing problems and about how to help those students.

This article describes some ways writing lab personnel can create opportunities to talk about writing with professors in business disciplines. In particular, this article describes some of my informal faculty development efforts with the School of Business at Missouri Southern State College during the 1993-1994 college year.

## Writing lab credibility with business professors

Two recent events may motivate business professors to learn more about writing instruction. First, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) recently changed the CPA examination to grade the *quality* of writing,

not just the *content* of the writing as in previous years. Accounting departments want a high percentage of their better students to pass the CPA examination. Many accounting departments are judged by their graduates' success rate on the CPA exam.

Second, the new version of the Graduate Management Admissions Test, (GMAT), includes a hour-long analytical writing exam. The ramifications of this may be dramatic for schools of business. Approximately 250,000 applicants to business schools around the country take the GMAT each year. These test results are sent to over 1,300 graduate schools of business and are used to make admissions decisions.

Despite these two extrinsic motivators, business professors may be skeptical when people with degrees in English try to tell them how to teach business writing. Many business professors believe that English professors are impractical and that the writing done in English classes is wordy and subjective. In my first month with the School of Business, two business professors "explained" to me that business writing is much different from the writing done in the English Department. One said that business writing is much different from the "belles lettres you English professors write."

These stereotypes seem to be further entrenched if writing lab personnel approach business instructors with the writing-to-learn WAC orientation (Kirscht, Levine, and Reiff 370). The writing-to-learn approach tends to make little sense to business faculty and seems to them to be an example of impractical literary writing.

On the other hand, business teachers respond much better to the writing-in-the-disciplines orientation to WAC (Kirscht, Levine, and Reiff 371). Writing lab staff should take the time to learn about the specific conventions and contexts of academic and workplace writing in each business discipline. My credibility was greatly enhanced when I was able to suggest writing assignments that use case scenarios that are similar to on-the-job writing tasks. It seemed to them that I knew more about that aspect of their discipline than they did.

Further, business professors feel more capable and comfortable teaching with writing assignments drawn from rhetorical situations in the workplace of their discipline. For example, an accounting teacher and I developed an assignment in which the students' task was to (1) research the advisability of a client's investing in a particular company, and (2) write a letter to the client with a recommendation supported by substantial accounting evidence, for example, profitability and solvency measures. The students took on the role of junior level financial analysts and wrote the letter for the senior analyst (the professor) to send under his signature. This rhetorical situation helped the accounting teacher respond to students' writing from a familiar perspective. He didn't have to "turn into an English teacher" as he had feared when he first tried to use writing assignments in his courses.

## Presentations on writing to business classes

One way to create opportunities to talk to business teachers about writing is to volunteer to make presentations on writing to their classes. Writing lab staff can

initially speak to the classes of one or two receptive professors. If the presentations are done well, word will spread quickly and many invitations will follow. After all, we all like to have someone teach our classes for a day. In addition, business instructors will feel they are doing something to help students improve their writing.

Class presentations offer many informal opportunities to talk with faculty about their writing instruction. Professors will receive “faculty development” without their thinking of it in those terms.

When business teachers ask me to make presentations to their classes, I tell them that I want to adapt my presentations to the needs of their students. Therefore, before I make a presentation, I talk to faculty about their course content and writing assignments. Sometimes, if I’m able to create good rapport, these discussions lead to a series of in-depth discussions about teaching writing.

I refuse to give a class presentation unless the teacher is in the classroom. My presentations are ostensibly for the students, but I am also speaking to their instructors. I believe that the teachers learn as much as their students. These professors, who might not attend formal faculty development workshops, must sit through multiple presentations to multiple classes.

My most popular presentation describes a four-stage model of the writing process. After I present my model to a class of students, I ask the students to freewrite on how it relates to them and their actual writing process. Then I ask students to report what they had just written. We usually go around the room, student by student. Typically, many students report how my model helps them understand their own writing better, for example, why they have difficulty getting started or why they get so frustrated, or why they procrastinate.

These student reports and my com-

ments seem to interest and surprise professors. They learn more about the impact of their assignments on their students. They gain a better understanding of their own students’ writing processes and writing problems.

### Committee work

Committee work can provide opportunities to talk about writing with business faculty. For example, at my college, the School of Business established a committee to develop a proposal for an MA degree in accounting. Committee membership consisted of business professors and two others: an oral communications expert and a writing expert—me. During one academic year, this committee and several subcommittees met frequently to develop the MA program: to write a mission statement, to describe competencies that graduates of the program should possess, to plan the curriculum, and to plan a built-in mechanism for program evaluation.

These meetings provided many opportunities to talk about writing instruction. For example, during a series of meetings, members of the Curriculum Subcommittee debated how to insure that MA graduates would be good writers. Some business faculty believed that MA students should be required to take one graduate course in writing for accountants. The course would teach them “writing skills.” One professor stated angrily that such a course shouldn’t be necessary because students should have “learned grammar” in freshman English classes.

I discussed writing instruction with the committee during the meetings and with individual committee members between meetings. The urgency of developing a curriculum motivated them to think about how to prepare students to become good writers.

My credibility suffered at times because I am not an accountant or even a business professor. Sometimes the discussions became heated. However, I

was able to call on authorities from the accounting profession such as Claire May and Susan Menelaides who wrote about the six criteria for grading the written portion of the CPA examination: (1) appropriateness for the audience, (2) responsiveness to the assignment, (3) coherent organization, (4) clarity, (5) conciseness, and (6) use of standard English (78-79).

I pointed out that only one of the six criteria is concerned with “proper English.” The other criteria are not isolated “skills,” but rather are inextricably linked to accounting content and contexts. With the help of several enlightened accounting teachers, I was able to convince the committee that writing should be a part of every course, that students need many opportunities to practice creating and expressing complex accounting concepts for various purposes and audiences. Some professors also acknowledged that writing assignments can help students learn course content.

### Helping professors with their own writing

One way to help business faculty improve their writing instruction is to help them with their own writing process. Some teachers hold distorted notions of the writing process that make writing difficult and unpleasant for them. If writing lab staff can help them to reduce counterproductive beliefs and practices in their own writing, then business professors may be able to apply what they learned to improve their writing instruction.

For example, I know of an accounting instructor who was drawn to the accounting profession because of its order and precision. He describes accounting as “neat” in that everything has its place and fits together precisely. On the other hand, he finds writing “messy” because he lacks the tolerance for the ambiguity and disorder of early drafts. When he writes, he becomes frustrated because he believes his first drafts should be orderly and correct as his financial statements.

He feels inadequate about his writing ability and avoids writing whenever possible.

The professor's beliefs about writing are reflected in the ways he assigns and responds to student writing. He states that students need only learn "the basics." This belief gives him the rationale not to provide his students with practice in creating, developing, and organizing complex course content. He requires a paper that follows a highly structured format in which students simply "plug in data." This formula reduces writing to filling in the blanks. Further, he does not provide them with feedback during writing or at completion. He requires one lengthy term paper each semester that is due the last day of class.

However, when teachers are forced to write, perhaps for a grant proposal or to publish for promotion, then they may be able to recognize the distortions in their conceptions of the writing process. While they are struggling to produce their own writing, they may be receptive to information about writing as a process. For example, the same teacher asked me to help him "edit" a grant proposal that the Dean of the School of Business had asked him to write. The proposal that he wanted me to "edit" needed much more than editing. He had discussed general principles related to the proposal, but he had not addressed how these general principles related to the specific purposes of his proposal at our institution.

The importance the Dean had placed on the grant and the approaching due date motivated the instructor to be receptive to my assistance. I helped him understand that he should not expect the content and expression of his first draft to emerge full blown in finished product form. I was able to lead him through several drafts and to give him the experience of developing the content and form of his proposal. He eventually understood that the disorder of early drafts is necessary and useful, and that he should not focus on correctness until later drafts.

Further, he acknowledged that students need more than the "basics."

### Unexpected opportunities

One obstacle to helping faculty improve their writing instruction is that many don't want to take the time and effort to examine their teaching methods. If they are not having serious problems with their classes, many professors are content to continue teaching the way they've been teaching. Inertia and competing interests make them unwilling to examine their writing instruction.

However, sometimes unexpected opportunities arise that create opportunities for authentic conversations about writing. Sometimes special circumstances motivate faculty to examine their attitudes and practices about writing instruction. For example, when the director of WAC proposed a program by which selected students could graduate with the honor "Writing with Distinction" on their diploma, a ground swell of strong resistance immediately arose, especially from some professors in the School of Business.

Most of their initial resistance was not very well thought out; however, it was very vehement. They hadn't developed their arguments clearly, but they had very strong feelings against the program. This proposed new program had hit some kind of nerve in them.

In the weeks prior to the Academic Policy Committee's vote on the proposal, most of the campus was talking about it. People who normally would not be willing to talk (or even think) about writing instruction were forced to read and think about it and come up with logical reasons to resist or support the proposal. Writing lab staff and others had multiple opportunities to talk about writing. Many lively debates and meaningful discussions occurred.

Because of the intense emotions, writing professionals had to use their best interpersonal skills. They had to be careful

to not inflame defensiveness and negativism. So they listened to teachers, trying to understand their reasoning, providing information when appropriate.

In the end, the Academic Policy Committee defeated the "Writing with Distinction" proposal. However, much that is positive came from the whole affair. Of course, many people received "faculty development" although no one called it that. In addition, opponents of the proposal countered with their own proposal—a Minor in Writing, a twenty-credit course of study that students of any major could earn. Also, in the future, a modified version of the "Writing with Distinction" proposal may be adopted.

### Conclusions

These informal approaches to helping faculty improve writing instruction can be more effective than formal approaches for at least two reasons. First, informal encounters frequently engage teachers who do not attend formal faculty development activities. Survey research (Angelo 3) on campus-wide faculty development programs has found that a relatively small percentage of college professors take advantage of formal faculty development programs, and that those who participate are often the ones who need it the least.

Second, this informal approach to faculty development tends to produce a higher quality of engagement with faculty than typically occurs with formal faculty development activities. According to Angelo (3-4), the most common approach to faculty development is the "quantitative" or "additive" model of faculty development that tends to assume that instructors will improve their teaching if they attend a number of workshops or seminars.

However, the group presentational format is not well suited for adapting material to the interests and temperaments of individual professors, nor for adapting general ideas about teaching to disci-

pline-specific strategies that a teacher of a particular course can act upon.

On the other hand, informal conversations between writing lab faculty and professors are more likely to take into account the uniqueness of each teacher and the discipline-specific nature of thinking and writing. Business faculty will learn effective principles for teaching writing more readily in the context of practical situations, such as when they are trying to help difficult students in their classes who have particular writing problems.

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May, Claire B., and Susan L. Menelaides. "Good Writing Counts." *Journal of Accountancy* July 1993: 77-79.

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## *Calendar for Writing Centers Associations*

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).

October 4-5: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Paul, MN

Contact: Ginger Young, Central Missouri State University, Humphreys 120, 320 Goodrich Drive, Warrensburg, MO 64093

Oct. 24-26: Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association, in Albuquerque, NM

Contact: Anne Mullin, Writing Lab, Campus Box 8010, Idaho State University, Pocatello, ID 83209 (208-236-3662).

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