

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

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

February, 2002

## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

As I assemble each issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, I continue to admire the way authors of articles illustrate a pervading writing center ability to be “reflective practitioners,” in the sense that Donald Schön introduced the term in *The Reflective Practitioner* (Basic Books, 1984). That reflection-in-action is clearly illustrated here as we read Greg Ahrenhoerster and Jon Brammer’s discussion of how, as they began considering the effectiveness and purpose of their OWL, they moved to a more encompassing act of questioning the goals of their whole tutoring program. When Eric Gardner, Cynthia Lyman, and Kambria McLean reflected on their work with non-traditional students, that led them to larger questions of tutoring ethics.

And when Dona Hickey and Joe Essid discuss the process of developing videos for tutor training, they offer us insights into larger goals for such video programs and the importance of not letting technology shape pedagogy. And Jessica Shaw’s Tutors’ Column on melting icy students reminds us that every strategy cannot guarantee success and that, in the end, all we can do as tutors is to try our best.

• Muriel Harris, editor

## ...INSIDE...

*What’s the Point of Your OWL? Online Tutoring at the University of Wisconsin Colleges*

• Greg Ahrenhoerster and Jon Brammer 1

*Conference Calendar* 6

*Writing Center Ethics and “Non-traditional Students”*

• Eric Gardner, Cynthia Lyman, and Kambria McLean 7

*Tutors’ Column:*

*“How to Melt an Icy Student”*

• Jessica D. Shaw 12

*It’s a Wrap: Digital Video and Tutor Training*

• Dona Hickey and Joe Essid 13

## What’s the point of your OWL? Online tutoring at the University of Wisconsin colleges

### Introduction

There is no question that the mad rush to incorporate computer technology into education is stampeding forward at a tremendous rate. Eric Hobson, in “Straddling the Virtual Fence,” appropriately compares the movement towards computer technology in higher education to “the land rushes of the nineteenth century” (ix). Asynchronous courses, computerized classrooms, and Online Writing Labs (OWLs) have sprung up at even the smallest institutions. However, what is still in question is whether or not any of this technology has actually improved anything. Perhaps the technological movement is now firmly enough established for us to pause a moment and evaluate how we are doing. Of course, to do this, we need to remind ourselves of what we were trying to do in the first place.

In her 1997 article, “OWLs: Online Writing Labs,” Lynne Anderson-Inman suggests that there are two reasons for

setting up OWLs: “They bring visibility to the campus writing center and also serve students who may have difficulty getting to the center for writing assistance.” Although she is almost certainly correct in her observation, this fact begs a rather important question, “Who is the OWL primarily designed to benefit?” The college? The writing lab? The tutors? The students? Certainly all of them can benefit on some level at the same time, but ultimately, all programs need a primary purpose. Only by understanding what

this purpose is can we discern whether or not the OWL is effective.

The “and also” in Anderson-Inman’s comment implies that the benefit to students is, at least in some cases, something of an afterthought, and she is probably right. Regardless of whether or not this is the way things should be, we still need to evaluate what we are doing. If the OWL is truly little more than a billboard for the “real” writing center, then we need to discern whether or not the time and effort being expended in the project is being well spent. On the other hand, if the OWL’s purpose is to help students learn to write better, we need to figure out if it actually is doing so. Unfortunately, as Hobson points out, there are almost “no published analyses of the user/audience demographics of any OWL or of how these users interact with the site and the available information and services” (xxii). Likewise, only recently have there been published studies of the effectiveness of any particular OWL, and, as we will note, the focus of these studies seems to be somewhat misdirected.

This problem is of particular concern to us at the University of Wisconsin-Waukesha because, though we are part of a very large and respected state university system, we are a rather small cog in the machine. We need to know whether or not our limited funds and staff are being used efficiently. Thus, when we received funding to set up our own OWL in the summer of 1999, we made it a priority to evaluate the project at the end of the fall semester. Being a new program, our survey group was relatively small (only twenty papers were submitted to the OWL in its first semester); however, the data we gathered revealed a significant, and somewhat unexpected, response that has caused us to rethink our strategy for both online and in-person tutoring.

Before discussing our survey results, allow us to briefly explain what our

college and tutoring program are and what our purpose is (supposed to be). UW-Waukesha is one of thirteen two-year colleges in the University of Wisconsin system, and our mission is to “offer freshman/sophomore level university education” to students intending to transfer to baccalaureate institutions (University of Wisconsin 4). As the largest of the two-year colleges in the system, UW-Waukesha is able to support a peer-tutoring program certified by the College Reading and Learning Association. Unlike writing labs at larger institutions, our tutors are sophomores who have gotten A’s in Composition II, not seniors or graduate students, yet our data suggest that they are effective tutors. For example, in 1999, 144 students taking writing courses worked with writing tutors at UW-Waukesha; 84% of them got a C or better in their writing course and had an average English GPA of 2.76, as opposed to the overall population of which 69% earned a C or better and had an average English GPA of 2.40 (U.W. Waukesha Study Center, 15). Despite our confidence in them, we are careful to advertise our English tutors as very good peer respondents, not as all-knowing writing experts.

Because many of the other two-year campuses are too small to support tutoring programs at all, it was suggested in 1998 that an OWL could be set up that would allow UW-Waukesha writing tutors to help students with essays via e-mail at both Waukesha and the smaller campuses. Generally modeled after OWLs at larger universities, containing web pages with tips on grammar and essay writing and directions for e-mailing a paper to a tutor, the UW-Waukesha OWL was open for business in the fall of 1999. Interested students from any of the two-year campuses must attach their essays to or paste them into an e-mail that also includes required information, such as an explanation of the assignment, the name of the instructor, and specific concerns about the essay. These e-mails are sent to the OWL director,

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**Manuscripts:** Recommended length for articles is 10-15 double-spaced typed pages, 3-5 pages for reviews, and 4 pages for the Tutors’ Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. If possible, please send as attached files or as cut-and-paste in an e-mail to mjturley@purdue.edu. Otherwise, send a 3 and 1/2 in. disk with the file, along with the paper 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).

who forwards them to an available tutor. The tutor responds directly to the student, and a tutor report detailing what was covered in the session is e-mailed to the instructor with another copy going to the OWL director. At this point, our limited staff prevents us from using "MOO" or "chat" technology that would allow us to provide better back-and-forth communication between OWL tutors and students, which places both tutor and student at something of a disadvantage.

### Data Collection and Results

Towards the end of the semester, all students who used the OWL were e-mailed a ten-question survey which asked them to, among other things, rate their experience using the OWL and the usefulness of the tutor's response on a scale from 1-5 (5 being best), state whether they thought their grade improved as a result of using the OWL, and state whether or not they would recommend the OWL to a friend. Compared to most student surveys, an impressive 53% of the students responded to the OWL survey. Most of what we learned was helpful, but by far the most interesting survey finding was the surprising disparity between the responses from students in English 102 (Composition II) and those in English 101 (Composition I) or English 098 (Basics of Composition).

Simply put, the students in English 102 had very positive things to say; whereas, students in the lower-level classes did not. English 102 students rated the value of the response they got from the tutor at 4.0 on average (5 being best), and 100% of the 102 students thought the response helped improve their grade on their paper. Likewise, all of the 102 students who responded said they would recommend the OWL to a friend. Conversely, English 098/101 students rated the value of the response from the tutor at 2.0 on average (5 being best), and only a mere 33% thought their grade improved or said they would recommend the OWL to a friend.

The comments from the students who were dissatisfied with the OWL reveal that they were looking for more help with mechanical errors and less focus on content. Their criticism and frustration was straightforwardly voiced by a 101 student who wrote that the tutor's response was not helpful "because he didn't help me with what I needed help on, which was grammar." Like many writing centers, we generally encourage our tutors to take a top-down approach to responding to papers, with matters of content and organization on the top and grammar and punctuation at the bottom. This was exactly what the students in English 102 apparently needed and were looking for; one 102 student even commented that it was "better that you do not correct . . . the spelling mistakes and grammar." Our initial response to the critical 098 and 101 students was that they didn't understand the OWL's purpose. After all, it says quite plainly on our website that the tutors "will not repair your mechanical errors." However, as we thought about it, we realized that, though we had the disclaimer in place, the OWL was clearly not fulfilling the needs of the students in the lower-level composition classes.

On the other hand, the final English grades of the students who used the OWL suggest that it was equally effective for all students. The average GPA in English classes for all of the students who used the OWL in the fall of 1999 was 3.44 (on a 4.0=A scale). It should be noted that there was not a considerable difference in the grades of the students in English 102 and those in 101 and 098. The average English GPA for 102 students was 3.477, whereas the average English GPA for 098/101 students was 3.388. It is tempting to look at these numbers and label ourselves a rousing success, but that would be rather hasty. These numbers only have meaning if the typical OWL student is representative of the general student population. However, such an assumption is difficult to support. It makes sense that only particu-

larly serious and organized students would have a draft completed enough ahead of time to submit it to the OWL. Thus, it is possible that the 098/101 students could have achieved these grades without the OWL's help, if, as they report, the OWL didn't provide the help they needed.

One reaction might be that we really helped the students and they didn't realize it, but why are we so quick to assume that we know best what the student needs help with? Why do we presume to know more about the student and his/her class than the student? What kind of service are we providing if we are not giving our clients the help they request? Most of us would be annoyed if we took our car in to get the muffler replaced, and the mechanic refused, claiming that we really need a tire rotation instead. The mechanic might be right or at least have good intentions, but he/she also might just prefer to do tire rotations than muffler replacements for some reason.

We could, perhaps, be confident that we truly knew what was best for the student if all composition instructors had the exact same expectations of "good writing," but, of course, this is simply not the case. Even amongst the relatively small group of twelve or so English instructors who teach at the Waukesha campus, there is considerable difference in the expectations of student writing. Whereas some instructors most strongly reward interesting ideas or depth of thought, others reward organization or grammar. Those of us who have worked at UW-Waukesha awhile have learned to modify our responses based on a particular instructor's grading criteria as we learn them, but certainly it would be unreasonable to expect a student tutor to get to know all of the writing instructors on all thirteen of the campuses well enough to make such adjustments. When we don't know the instructor, our initial response is often to tell the students what to focus on

based on what *we* think good writing should be instead of relying on the student to tell us what help they need, a mistake that is likely compounded by the lack of back-and-forth communication in an OWL tutoring session. Although our intentions are probably good, we also may well be guilty of avoiding certain topics, in part, because we find them difficult to teach or beneath us. But regardless of why we are doing it, we tutors must determine why we are not always giving our clients what they ask for.

This conundrum has caused us to re-examine the purpose of not just our OWL but our entire tutoring program. We are an institution primarily devoted to educating students, and the OWL's mission, we have agreed, is to support this process. Yet our survey indicates we are not doing this as well as we could be. There are two reasonable reactions, we concluded, to our situation. The first is to continue doing what we are doing. We are apparently helping over half of the students who submit things, especially those in English 102, who make up 60% of the OWL users, and that might be good enough. The second option is to change what we are doing so as to better serve *all* students, by training our tutors to adjust their responses based on the information provided by the student, something we are somewhat hesitant to do because our tutors are only sophomores, and it might be very difficult to train them to do this well in the time allotted.

### Questions to Consider

Given such a small sample of respondents in the survey pool, it is difficult to definitively state grand conclusions. However, our preliminary findings suggest four key questions that must be considered:

*What is the mission of writing labs and OWLs?* Regardless of theoretical paradigm or teaching style, writing specialists, writing center directors,

and tutors at all levels need to address this basic question. Ultimately, the answer must be student centered and student focused. When it comes down to it, a college educator, especially an educator at a two-year institution like UW—Waukesha, is in the service industry. Students are essentially clients paying for a service and a product of that service. Do most instructors take this view? Probably not. Usually, when a student fails a class, an instructor is likely to blame the student, not his or her curriculum or teaching style. As tutors, we have more flexibility to tailor our mission to suit the needs we recognize. For writing center professionals, the answer of who to blame needs to focus on how to improve services. Should we continue a service, like an OWL, if students are not actually succeeding? Should we maintain our obsessions with pet theories or our advocacy of process/ dialogue approaches when only select students are benefiting from that experience? Our college's mission statement suggests that it is our *obligation* to re-structure a service if it is not meeting student needs.

*Why are OWLs not tracking rates of efficacy?* As Hobson notes, OWL programs do not usually track rates of success in their student/client population. If this is never done, how can an OWL program, or any tutoring program for that matter, be assessed with any accuracy? We see reports of OWLs at various campuses that need to restrict submissions because of "huge demand for service" ("Online Writing and Learning"). Being busy implies only that many people are working very hard to respond to student work and that many papers are being submitted, but does busy equal effective? If an OWL exists solely as a publicity stunt, then the answer is probably "yes," and tracking student success in the program is not really an issue. On the other hand, if an OWL is designed to make students the real first priority, then assessing the

success of the service, especially in terms of student achievement and satisfaction, is imperative.

*Are we "passing the buck" when dealing with some OWL clients?* Just as many professors are reluctant to tackle the actual "nuts and bolts" of writing, some writing center staff members are hesitant to speak of low-order mechanical details when discussing student papers. This fear is, perhaps, justified if it is a product of the campus climate. As writing center staff members, we are often faced with a choice about how much to "divulge" to a student when discussing drafts in progress, for fear of being accused of providing too much help. How we approach this choice and how we deal with the different facets of a draft can make or break the relationship between a writing center and faculty member in English or other disciplines that might recommend writing specialists or tutors to students in need. However, it seems that many writing labs avoid issues of mechanics out of fear of being labeled a "proof-reading service." This is unfortunate. There is a vast expanse of territory between proof-reading and the standard top-down approach to writing. Only by exploring this chasm can we become aware of the fact that it is possible to help students learn grammar basics without being a proof-reader. Furthermore, this type of help is often exactly what the students need. Some English instructors set a high bar for student performance and only identify the deficiencies in the student's work without giving the blueprint as to how to improve it. They provide the starting point (their evaluation of student work) and end point (the standard they set for the class), but the roadmap from point A to point B is left unexplained. When we meet students, either face-to-face or online, our role should be to identify this route and make it useful for the student, no matter what the specific compositional arena may be. If we choose to neglect our stu-



dents by not providing this roadmap, it should only be out of necessity, not because we are too lofty with our theoretical framework or too lazy to adjust to our students' needs.

*What should be the current focus of publications on OWL work?* When we look at recent publications on issues like OWLs and technology in the writing center in general, the majority of authors seem to deal with theoretical or historical surveys, descriptions of current programs, or best-case anecdotal samples of why their approach is innovative and useful. Inman and Sewell, in *Taking Flight with OWLs: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work*, seem to have taken a step in the right direction by attempting to look critically at OWL services, but they still seem to miss the point that the ultimate purpose of OWLs is to help students first and foremost. The online magazine, *Kairos*, also evaluates OWLs with a "hoot" system (similar to stars in a movie review) using the parameters of ease of navigation/layout, feedback on a submitted paper, hand-outs, and other links to resources. In one issue, they reviewed ten OWLs, ranging from a two "hoot" site to a four and a half "hoot" site. It is important to note that the rating in the "Feedback on a Submitted Paper" category was determined by each OWL's response to a paper that was "doctored a bit" by the *Kairos* staff to contain mechanical errors, and a high rating was only awarded if the "majority of 'errors' [were] caught." On one hand, this seems a fair and impartial approach, but, on the other hand, why evaluate the OWL with pretend papers and from a writing center's perspective of what is important when we could just ask the students sending in real papers if they are getting helped? The *Kairos*-style of review is ultimately misdirected; it misses the point as to the most important OWL function. Does it matter

if our OWL web interfaces are clear, colorful and easy to use if the students tracked using the service are not succeeding in their composition courses? An OWL page can look fabulous and the responses could look good from an "objective" point of view, but what are students looking for? At our campus, most students will not become English majors; they might be only taking one freshman composition class in their lives. They want help to get through that course with the best possible grade. Bahktinian paradigms, dialogue approaches, and other theoretical underpinnings are fine for academic debate, but none of them explain to John Q. Student why he failed to pass English 101 even when he went to the writing center for every paper to discuss comma usage. Future publications need to be directed towards assessing *actual* results in terms of *actual* student success rates.

### Changes for This Term

Not surprisingly, as we pondered this data, we made a list of the problematic areas, as we saw them, and proposed suggestions for implementing changes for the administration of the OWL pilot. These covered the full range of the issues described above as well as some additions to our own tutor training. Our first obvious task for this term was to refine our information-collecting mechanism. We re-designed our submission form to hopefully get more specific information from the students about their expectations and their instructor's expectations and to make more of an effort to ensure that the students feel that their needs are being met. We also attempted to train our tutors to pay more attention to the individual needs of each student, and provide them with a mechanism for dealing with issues of grammar and punctuation. Finally, we decided to refine our OWL questionnaire and begin surveying the students who work with face-to-face tutors as well. In the past, we relied on the students' grades in

composition courses to evaluate our writing lab, but our experience with the OWL survey indicates this may not be accurate. Hopefully, with the students' feedback, we will have enough information to make an accurate assessment of our program's worth, allowing us to decide whether to continue or focus our limited resources elsewhere.

### Final Remarks

In closing, what we are suggesting is that directors of writing labs and OWLs look at their programs and honestly face the question of why that service is being implemented at all. Is it an actual effort to reach students or yet another form of technological innovation without purpose? If it turns out to be the latter, how can we, as writing center staff members or OWL coordinators, focus on getting the maximum amount of service to the students who need it? Are we assessing our programs along meaningful lines of comparison, or are we presenting our OWL sites as competitors in a vast web page contest? We have been able to look at quantitative data that has helped us understand how our service is being used and how our direction needs to change. We have also suggested a few methods, that we tried this term, to reorganize the way we approach our tutoring services. We would hope that more programs attempt to do the same.

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## Director, University Writing Center Northern Illinois University

Director oversees administrative operations of a new, high-tech facility, develops resources through grant writing, collaborates with WAC coordinator on outreach & workshops, designs a program of staff training, assesses services yearly, tutors, and teaches one course per academic year.

Qualifications: Prefer Ph.D. Rhetoric/Composition, English (concentration Composition Studies), or relevant area; will consider extensive administrative background. Minimum 2-4 years in a writing center or similar environment. Considerable expertise with electronic writing technologies. Salary

mid-upper 40s; regular continuing employment. Full description: <<<http://www.engl.niu.edu/wac/uwcdirector.html>><http://www.engl.niu.edu/wac/uwcdirector.html>>.

Receive complete applications March 10, 2002 for interviews CCCC Chicago, March 20-23. Send letter of application, CV, 3 current professional references, and SASE to Brad Peters, English Department, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115. AA/EEO Institution.

## *Calendar for Writing Centers Associations*

Feb. 22-23, 2002: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Clear Lake, TX  
**Contact:** Chloe Diepenbrock, Box 77, University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2700 Bay Area Blvd. Houston, TX 77058. Phone: 281-283-3356 (office); 281-283-3360 (fax); e-mail: [Diepenbrock@cl.uh.edu](mailto:Diepenbrock@cl.uh.edu).

March 1, 2002: Northern California Writing Centers Association, in Hayward, CA  
**Contact:** Cindy Hicks: phone: 510-723-7151; e-mail: [chicks@clpccd.cc.ca.us](mailto:chicks@clpccd.cc.ca.us). Conference Web site: <<http://chabotde.clpccd.cc.ca.us/users/ydominguez/NCWCA/index.html>>

April 4-6, 2002: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Canton, Ohio  
**Contact:** Jay D. Sloan, Kent State University-Stark Campus, 6000 Frank Ave. N.W., Canton, OH 44720-7599. E-mail:

[jsloan@stark.kent.edu](mailto:jsloan@stark.kent.edu); phone: 330-244-3458; fax: 330-494-1621.

April 11-13, 2002: International Writing Centers Association, in Savannah, GA  
**Contact:** Donna Sewell, Dept. of English, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA 31698. Phone: 229-333-5946; fax: 229-259-5529; e-mail: [dsewell@valdosta.edu](mailto:dsewell@valdosta.edu).

April 19-20, 2002: Northeast Writing Centers Association, in Smithfield, RI  
**Contact:** J.P. Nadeau ([jnadeau@bryant.edu](mailto:jnadeau@bryant.edu)) or Sue Dinitz (<[sdinitz@zoo.uvm.edu](mailto:sdinitz@zoo.uvm.edu)>). Conference Web site: <<http://web.bryant.edu/~ace/WrtCtr/NEWCA.htm>>.

April 27, 2002: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Wye Mills, MD  
**Contact:** Cathy Sewell, The Writing Center, PO Box 8, Wye Mills, MD 21673. Phone: 410-822-5400, ext. 1-368; fax: 410-827-5235; e-mail: [csewell@Chesapeake.edu](mailto:csewell@Chesapeake.edu)

# Writing center ethics and “non-traditional students”

*We've chosen a “semi-trialogue” form for this essay—in part to symbolize our on-going conversations on the issues we raise. Thus, each of us maintains an individual voice (labeled by last name) in what follows.*

**Gardner:** In the first five minutes of our session, I've found out that the forty-something woman sitting with me—we'll call her Bea—is divorced, is in the midst of her first semester in college (which she's finding overwhelming; she's the first in her family to go to college), and has two children—one of whom is in daycare for exactly 36 more minutes. The commute is 15 minutes, the paper is freshman comp and due tomorrow, and she's at her wit's end.

So when I hear those words I've grown so used to hearing from the mouths of 18-21 year old, single, white, upper-middle-class kids who aren't working and are living on campus, “I don't have time for much”—for reading aloud, for open-ended questioning, for looking at our resources, for talking through a past graded paper, etc.—I find myself admitting she's right. She doesn't have time for much. She also doesn't have time to hear that folks who have some demographic similarities to her—so-called “non-traditional students”—are not commonplace in research on writing centers in general (Cynthia Haynes-Burton's “Thirty-something Students” being the notable exception) —much less work on writing center ethics. That, to lots of educators, she's been invisible.

I get the distinct sense she already knows that anyway.

She does, clearly, fall into a category of students who are common in ethics

literature—that of what Michael Pemberton calls “the Quickfixer” with a capital “Q” (“Student Agendas” 12). Many of her fellow non-trads that I've seen do, too—often approaching the writing center as a business, or, dare I say it, bank of writing knowledge. But her request that I “give her paper a quick proofread” and her subsequent cajoling and pushing for me to be more and more specific about just what she should do with her paper raise a number of questions circling around this locus: Should I handle her request differently because of her profile and because, quite honestly, at first glance, I take her “I don't have time” a lot more seriously than I ever took it from those “traditional” students?

My answer—and that of the undergraduate tutors at my University's writing center, a few “traditional” and many “non-traditional” in lots of rich and exciting ways—is a resounding maybe. In what follows, I group those questions under three large rubrics—the ethics of assumption, the ethics of practice, and the ethics of mission (though I see some crossover between the areas and want to say immediately that many of the questions go beyond just the issue of “non-traditional” students and writing center ethics). Two of our writing center's peer mentors respond to each of the groups of questions—sometimes by asking more questions, and often by trying to chart out complex negotional processes in dialogue with tutoring styles and philosophies they've developed over several hundred sessions. Kambria McLean is close to “traditional” in terms of age, but “non-traditional” in that, in addition to being a full-time student (a junior majoring in English Education/Honors), she's married and the mother of two. She joined our writ-

ing center in 1997; students consistently praise her patience and willingness to explain complex issues clearly and in-depth. Cynthia Lyman just graduated from our honors program with a focus in writing; at age 39, she is considering graduate school. She joined our writing center when we opened our doors in Fall 1996 and has been an active mentor to a generation of tutors.

## The Ethics of Assumption

**Gardner:** I tell my students that all assumptions are, at base, unethical. . . .

Is it fair to make assumptions based on a student's age? I'm thinking not only of some of the negative stereotypes that exist un- or semi-spoken—that non-trads all share Bea's scenario, lack time, are highly stressed, suffer from the effects of some pedagogies we now see as counterproductive, are hesitant to work with younger students (tutors), etc.—but also of some perhaps equally damaging positive stereotypes. One 49-year-old tutor joked with me about how many of his professors treat him as a sort of “model minority”: with all of his life experience, he *must* be better organized, better “put together,” more ready to work, more goal-centered, more savvy. Certainly he could never be a Quickfixer. . . .

While we're at it, why do I take an older student's quick-fix request so much more seriously than a younger student's? Are Bea's stakes higher? Different? Has she been forced into—and now simply trying to live within—the boundaries of the Quickfixer? What ethical problems does the term “non-traditional” bring up intrinsically? “Traditional” applies to so few of my students that I find the term at points laughable; even my 18-year-

olds are working 40 hours/week off campus. Though I don't want to push the analogy too far, "non-traditional" seems to have as little signifying power at this point as the term "non-white" does in discussions of race.

Beyond this, I want to echo and re-spin John Trimbur's questions about the linkage between "peer" and "tutor"; whose peers are we talking about, anyway? I'm also concerned—especially after a reading of Pemberton's thoughtful piece on "special needs" students—that the very term "non-traditional" itself locks us into a group identity and thus a set of strategies. Given my earlier linkage between "several non-traditional students" and the label "Quickfixer," the terms themselves may lead us to practice based only upon generalizations and stereotypes.

**McLean:** As a young tutor, I find it difficult sometimes to achieve the balance of power I feel I need in some tutoring sessions with older "non-traditional" students. As much as I try not to, I react differently to older and younger students: I find it easier to use humor with students nearer to my own age, for example; with older students I worry about whether they will see me as too "unprofessional." And when responding to a "non-traditional" student's paper, my deep-rooted upbringing forces me to think about respect for authority. It makes me somewhat embarrassed: as much as I declare the need to treat students equally, the issues seem to become somewhat confused in practice.

My experience with "non-traditional" students leads me to believe that I do make some of the assumptions typical of teachers and tutors: I tend to think of "non-traditional" students as older, and, because, I tend to assume that older students have a better grasp on some of the material, I explain some things less than I would to a young student just out of high school. I assume that older students will have a

larger vocabulary, more knowledge of social and cultural events, and more experience with the "real" working world. Conversely, sometimes I feel as though I treat them like idiots, explaining every detail of a thesis statement in my assumptions that they have been out of school for so long.

On the one hand, I feel as though I'm cheating some of the "non-traditional" students if I don't spend the same amount of time with them as I do with younger, more "traditional" students. I limit my strategies and approaches. It's not even as simple as asking "Do you have much time" as that I'm not sure students always know what's best for themselves. If I'm teaching them a valuable lesson, one that will affect their writing permanently, isn't it worth a little extra time for them? On the other hand, who am I to decide what's best for another student? Should older students hold this spell-binding power over us, "forcing" us toward shorter sessions and decreased productivity, or should we ignore the demands of childcare, work, and family, in order to give students lengthy but perhaps more productive sessions?

I think that power and directivity are inextricably bound together. Even though there are levels of directiveness, I think that the more we lean toward directiveness, the more power we seem to take from the student. For example, imagining a completely directive tutoring session (for me) brings to mind a tutor who, pen in hand, crosses out sections and inserts his/her own words. The least directive would, perhaps, take a much more Socratic approach, never touching the pencil and trying to draw the answers out of the student through strategic questioning. I'm not convinced that either polarization is beneficial; I think a balance is necessary. Generally, though, I think that the student whose tutor does less work *on* their paper (though, of course, not *in* the session) would probably feel more empowered.

**Lyman:** As a "non-traditional" student, I remember the first time I heard the term, and my reaction to having such a label applied to me. It was my first semester behind a school desk after almost 15 years of being away, and so much academic jargon was like a foreign language to me; I was in a 400-level class for several weeks before I even realized upper-division courses were considered most appropriate for advanced students (and at this point, I was "advanced" only as far as my age was concerned).

"Non-traditional" does seem to increasingly be a contradiction in terms—beyond just being an overused stereotype that covers a broad range of students—and so there seems to be a real danger in assuming that any student who hasn't entered the university directly from high school can be lumped into a single category, a collective consciousness with static needs. Whether "non-traditional" or not, each and every student is an individual with specific expectations, agendas, and goals. Although the majority of "non-traditional" students *may* have more obligations and responsibilities away from the classroom, it seems unreasonable to assume that there is any common thread that links them all together into a single sub-culture within the university. The longer I spent behind a desk, the more aware I became of other "non-traditional" faces like my own; I believe this trend will continue as people of various ages return to school for various reasons—eventually maybe making the term "non-traditional" obsolete.

### Ethics of Practice

**Gardner:** I open this group of questions by hoping that—thanks to the work of folks like Linda Shamoon, Deborah Burns, and Joan Hawthorne—we're beyond the notion that directive=bad, and nondirective=good. But I'm not sure we are. I'm thinking of similar experiences to those Hawthorne describes—specifically of how presenters at a recent Midwest



Writing Centers Association conference “seemed to assume . . . a commitment to a particular model of writing center pedagogy . . . [an] unspoken understanding . . . that tutoring is about improving the writer, not the writing; practice must follow from that premise. If our focus is on the writer, so the logic goes, directive tutoring is out (1).”

Hawthorne says that less formal conversations with individual attendees, though, “seemed to carry a contradictory subtext. ‘Of course the paper is important,’ was the contrasting message. ‘Writing center tutors work on editing and proofreading because those are important issues. . . . Sometimes we use directive tutoring because sometimes it’s the best strategy to use’” (1-2).

Beyond our on-going, complex dialogue with directiveness, we need to recognize the limits our language places on us here, too. Though Pemberton’s discussion of the Quickfixer is balanced and thoughtful, the term carries heavy negative connotations—and William O. Shakespeare’s “manipulative” learner carries even more (13). If Bea is manipulating me, who is at fault? And does anybody have to be at fault here?

Along these lines, but bigger: how do power relations shift when I’m tutoring someone significantly older than me? What are the dynamics of tutoring someone who could be your father or mother? For example: how does this shape or limit the “game of knowing and not knowing” in questioning? What blends of approaches and strategies are available to me? Do we have the time and power to work, for example, at the kind of negotiation Ira Shor talks of—or toward the kind of “social-expressivist” tutorial Don Bushman writes about (6)? And given that time seems to be Bea’s central concern (and that this concern is shared by several in her “group” and that I take the concern seriously), do

we do a patchjob—thinking something is better than nothing? How does this shift the balance between considering “higher order concerns” and “lower order concerns”? How and why does—or does—this limit a tutor’s ability to ask questions?

**McLean:** I have problems with any strategies in a tutoring session based on age, gender, race, and any other markers, for the same reason that I have a problem with stereotypes in general: they just don’t fit right. I firmly believe that different students have different learning needs and strategies, and that it is the responsibility of a “good” tutor to try to adapt to those needs. On the other hand, all that adaptation takes time, a precious commodity for many students, “traditional” and “non-traditional.” Is it better to “waste time” adapting, or to make a few quick assumptions and get on with the session?

I have tutored many students, and few of them use the same approaches. While some students need to talk to me about their papers, working the problems out verbally, others need to diagram their thesis statements in little boxes on the back of their drafts. Finding these strategies can be a hit-and-miss approach: I often try two or three approaches before settling on one that seems to work for the student. Most of the time, I feel comfortable with this approach. Spending time with a student equates concern for their work, and my sessions tend to be long. In tutoring “non-traditional” students, I often find myself using different approaches. While I might tell a younger student that they need to come in a bit earlier the next time around, I would feel very uncomfortable doing this in a session with an older student. I find myself too intimidated by age and respect to “chide” “non-traditional” students about deadlines and responsibility; it feels somewhat akin to reminding my grandmother to wear her coat and hat before she goes outside. Furthermore, instead of using a combi-

nation of directive and nondirective strategies, I tend to be directive much of the time with older students, due to time constraints and other “grown-up” issues. When a student comes in and appears pressed for time, however, I find myself unconsciously tensing. Older students especially have this effect: somehow their time seems more precious, their priorities more important. Every time the student glances at the clock, I silently berate myself for not being more concise, more efficient. Having my own children in daycare only compounds this problem: I think of the money it costs for a student to sit at a table listening to me ramble on and on about thesis statements and parallelism.

**Gardner:** A slippery slope: where do you draw the line between adapting to students’ needs and falling into ethical relativism? Or do you? (i.e., is my word “falling” ill advised?)

**McLean:** While I’m convinced that there is a set of ethics somewhere behind my tutoring, I’m not always able to easily articulate them. That said, I think that there are some clear-cut ethical boundaries that I would never cross: criticizing a student’s paper on the basis of cultural differences, for example, or using humor as a means of belittling a student. But those are in fact few. I don’t see a lot of “nevers” in tutoring, mostly because I think it limits us. We need to keep our possibilities open; while some students work best with a very hands-off approach, I find that I have actually needed to take the pencil away (gasp!) when students try to dictate my words to them into their paper, or, more simply, when I feel that they need to think more before writing their thoughts down. What works for one student very often doesn’t work for another.

**Lyman:** We can’t move Mount Olympus in a single session—even a lengthy one—and a harried student who is pressed for time is not a likely candidate for hardcore restructuring

work. Perhaps a way to deal with a student like Bea is to encourage her to make regular, brief appointments. Such a routine could accomplish two things: it may give the tutor a clearer sense of what the student's goals are, and it may send regular positive messages—confirmed signs of progress—to a student who may already be grappling with the real or imagined stigma of being branded as “different.”

Rather than capitulating to the notion that college students fall under the two umbrellas of “traditional” and “non-traditional,” after several semesters of tutoring, I tend to see more obvious “types” of students, although again here there are numerous gradations and shadings and nuances. The students I have encountered have either appeared to be motivated or to be going through the motions. If a student truly wants to improve his or her writing, s/he will find time to return to the Writing Center to work steadily. Revision is, after all, an on-going process.

**Gardner:** But you make establishing a routine sound so easy. . . .

**Lyman:** I might have bristled initially at a tutor telling me that if I truly wanted to improve, I'd find the time—especially if my schedule was terribly hectic. But I have the sneaking suspicion that eventually I'd have to believe this as truth. I was raised by a WW II-generation mother who taught me early on and modeled throughout my life that the only way to achieve was to work hard and stay on task. No making excuses. I'd resign myself to stealing extra moments—wherever I could find them—to do whatever it takes. And there are ways of making a brief amount of time very productive. . . .

### Ethics of mission

**Gardner:** Pemberton and several other folks have repeatedly and usefully reminded us that mission and context shape responses to ethical questions—that, at times, some care-fully contexted relativism may be

healthy. Our institution's mission might be perceived as conflicted: bring “non-traditional” students into the fold, but be tough, tough, tough (ironically, while we watch universities across the nation devalue developmental measures and watch students—especially non-trads—see such help as punitive). How much do I bend my practice, which, like that of the presenters Hawthorne describes is often influenced by Stephen North's work and especially by Jeff Brooks's minimalism (1)? Should I be the kind of tutor Bea seems to want—quick, directive, Mr. Fix-It—in hopes that there will be a next visit where we can do what the ethics literature and training manuals tell me we should? Is this for the greater good?

Just what does “bring into the fold” mean for non-trads—and is this a good thing to do? I'm thinking especially of Marilyn Cooper's call for tutors to help students create “really useful knowledge”—and to “critique the institutional structure of writing instruction in college” (98). While I'm a bit skeptical about her claim that “students and tutors who are outside of mainstream culture are usually more aware of the way language coerces them, but all students know how institutions coerce them in writing classes” (102), I'm thinking that Bea has been trying to be an agent for a long time. I'm thinking that her agency, like our own, is limited and exceedingly complex, that maybe she doesn't want to be liberated right now (and I'm not being sarcastic or flip here; I take Cooper's approach very seriously), that maybe being an agent doesn't always mean being evolutionary. I'm thinking that, like some of Ira Shor's savvy students, she's picking her battles. Why—and/or how—should I push her to fight today, now—more than she is?

**McLean:** As I said earlier, I believe that strategies based on age, race, gender, or other such characteristics are unethical. I think that tutors, as well as anyone else, should struggle to avoid

stereotyping students as such. However, I do believe that students need individual strategies adapted to their needs. What this implies for the tutor is that we should consider using a holistic approach to tutoring, considering other aspects of a student's life while helping them with a paper. Our writing center mission is to improve writers, not just their writing, and I think we need to adapt this idea the best we can to every student. While Bea and others like her may have limited time, there are certainly ways to work within those boundaries. Instead of working for long periods of time on five different issues, perhaps Bea could work on the one issue that seems most pressing. The tutor could also point Bea to resources she could use at home to improve her writing. If she has access to the technology, Bea could even take advantage of online tutoring. There are many options for her to use, not all of which are directive, “quick-fix” solutions. We may not improve Bea's writing by leaps, and it may be a slow and arduous process, but by small increments she may develop into a more effective writer.

Theory is always easier than practice, and it isn't always easy tutoring “non-traditional” students, regardless of the issues. But who said tutoring was supposed to be easy at all? We have to deal daily with students facing time constraints, learning disabilities, language barriers, and a myriad of other pressures. I believe we have a responsibility to give each person the same attention, the same careful thought we give all. In short, I don't think our mission of improving writers should change based on age and “non-traditional” status; I think we should continue to look at the individual.

**Gardner:** How would/do you encourage the “slow and arduous process” you mention above?

**McLean:** I think that perhaps the most important step we as tutors can take is recognizing that writing is a

painstaking process, often more so for the students we tutor than for ourselves. It helps me to have other classes I struggle in; the difficulties I face remind me that each student has his/her strengths and weaknesses. Closely tied to that, I think it's very important to introduce new material slowly. We need to take things step by step and try not to overwhelm the student who is already pressed for time. Perhaps most importantly, though, is the patience and encouragement we can give such students. Knowing that the first small step they've taken is one headed in the right direction can make more difference than we often realize.

**Lyman:** When I was taking our course on tutoring writing, I remember that many of our classroom discussions focused on the parameters of what constituted a successful session; the general consensus seemed to be that any session where one goal was accomplished—large or small—was a good session. One of my chief worries as a fledgling tutor was the issue of legitimacy: just because I was a fairly strong writer, did this somehow equip me with the ability to share this strength, to communicate my passion for language with others? Wouldn't any prospective student, older or younger, who came to the Writing Center for assistance quickly be able to spot me as a fraud?

My instructor in the course was instrumental in allaying my fears by reassuring us that communication was the key in being a viable tutor. Tutors didn't have to know all of the answers. It was even OK to admit this. Peer tutoring is theoretically a reciprocal pro-

cess; often a session teaches a tutor as much or more than it informs the tutee. The more experienced I've become as a tutor, the less I fear the vast gray areas of "unknowing"; I'm not afraid to admit when I don't automatically know how to answer a question and say, "Gee, let's see if we can figure it out together."

I think that it's normal for all new tutors to experience anxiety. So what if a tutor is a capable writer—does this somehow qualify him/her to be an effective tutor? I can see in retrospect that I had some unrealistic expectations when I started tutoring—maybe I'd hoped that I could magically make an individual more proficient all at once. But I gradually came to understand that each and every session was unique—different students, different needs, different concerns, etc. Legitimacy was something that came with experience—one tutoring interaction after another, each time making some difference, each time moving a student—"traditional," "non-traditional," other—closer to a goal.

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## Nominations for IWCA Executive Board

Elections for at-large representatives to the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) will be held in June. Positions are for two years, beginning in November 2002. Nominees should plan to attend meetings at the IWCA, CCCC, and NCTE conferences, and should send a brief (200 word) biography by April 1 to Leigh Ryan at LR22@umail.umd.edu or The Writing Center, 0125 Taliaferro Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742.

# TUTORS' COLUMN

## How to melt an icy student

Allison waltzes into the Writing Center. With her nose in the air, she lowers herself reluctantly into a chair and gingerly hands over her paper. As the tutor reads her work, Allison asks obnoxiously, "Are you qualified to read my paper?" As the tutor makes suggestions, Allison raises her eyebrows and defends her paper, dismissing every word. At this point, several thoughts fly through the tutor's head. What's the best way to handle a student like Allison? How do you stay collected and still attempt to help her?

Nearly every tutor encounters students that are so apathetic that they seem frightening, annoying, infuriating, or all of the above. Some can be melted by one or several strategies. Others, however, will never change. Icy students definitely pose a unique challenge to tutors. Regardless of the type, though, tutors should make an effort to both help the student and save their own sanity!

One option for the tutor is to try to melt the student immediately. After opening with friendly small-talk, pointed questions like, "What can I help you with today?" or "How would you like to revise your paper and make it better?" can encourage the student to open up and get involved in the session. After all, a simple case of anxiety could be the underlying cause of Allison's behavior, and once she

talks about her paper, it might just disappear along with the attitude!

After a student like Allison opens up about the paper's weaknesses, a good strategy would be to reinforce the philosophy of the writing center: to work with students, not against them. Regardless of where the paper falls in the writing process, students should feel reassured that the tutor will give them the appropriate attention and give positive as well as critical feedback.

Another option for tutors is to make an effort to help icy students without doing anything extra. Tutors must be friendly, ask questions, and read the paper with care, but limit the amount of suggestions: an attitude problem does not make for receptive students! Tutors should just get the main points across and focus on the big picture. By making a list of the top three ideas for improvement, tutors provide help with the paper that students can refer to later, hopefully when their obnoxious behavior has faded. Also, since challenging students are often defensive, tutors can say something like, "Well, I'll note my main suggestions here, and maybe as you revise they will become clearer." This way, the tutor is doing his or her job: helping the writer with the paper, and the session does not fuel

a confrontation as the student argues each of the tutor's comments.

At the end of the session, tutors should smile and thank the student for coming. They can also remind the student of the other resources the writing center has to offer. Handouts, written-only feedback, and a website may help the student in the future and push him or her to continue using the writing center. Encouraging the student to return helps to end a less-than-ideal session on a positive note.

For tutors, sometimes the greatest challenge can be to remember not to take anything personally! With icy students like Allison, there may be situations where nothing can be done. In these cases, tutors should just keep in mind that the students' issues are not their problem! If students waltz in with an attitude, they can waltz right back out the door with one, despite any efforts to accommodate them.

The point is, Allison may or may not be open to help. Maybe she was forced by a teacher to see a tutor, or perhaps she's afraid of writing since people have been overly critical of her work in the past. Tutors have zero control over these factors. All they can do is be patient, make an effort, and let it all go at the end.

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## Council of Writing Program Administrators

Call for Proposals  
July 11-14, 2002  
Park City, Utah  
*"The Form(ation) of Relationships"*

Proposals of not more than one page, single spaced—received by Feb. 15, 2002, will receive highest priority, and invitations will be issued March 15. Should program openings remain, additional proposals will be received until March 15 and invitations sent by April 15. Please include a cover sheet with the following: Name; Address; Email ID; Type of Session. Please send proposals and inquiries to Kathleen Yancey, Department of English, POB 340524, 602 Strode Tower, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634-0524 Email: [Kyancey@clemson.edu](mailto:Kyancey@clemson.edu); phone 864-656-5394; fax 864-656-1846.



# It's a wrap: Digital video and tutor training

All tutors, no matter their level of experience, run into difficult moments with writers. Certainly, we have all met writers who are:

- angry at their professors
- expecting only grammatical assistance
- reluctant to make any changes
- older than the tutor and not certain of the tutor's expertise
- hoping for a "fix" from a tutor who will do the writer's work.

Skilled tutors can, of course, adapt to most situations and respond ethically to these and other typical "trouble spots." The situation is very different for novice tutors. The problems outlined above, while common enough, may not crop up during a novice's apprenticeship. At our university we train tutors during a semester in which a new tutor might observe a half a dozen tutorials and conduct, under varying levels of supervision, a dozen more. Every year in our program, a few trainees come to me worried about the outcome of a tutorial. Some ethical line may have been crossed, a writer may have left the conference angry or confused, or a professor may have contacted the writing center with a complaint.

While we have gradually improved the content of our training course, including more "sample" papers, guided apprenticeships with faculty members and their classes, and exercises such as mock tutorials, students and faculty alike hoped we could better prepare apprentices for a range of ethical and pedagogical dilemmas that can occur.

For this reason, we began to consider adding video tutorials to our library of materials. Traditional videotape appealed to us early on, but it lacks the interactive nature of our other training

materials and in-class exercises. A linear videotape may work very well to introduce and demystify a writing center's services, a use Sara Sobota has made of video at Coastal Carolina University, but the audience for our project is the novice tutor, not the new visitor to the center. Since our staff has access to some high-end video editing equipment and a staff well trained in Web design, we decided to try an experiment with digital video (or DV), a Web site with multiple video clips for different approaches to "tough tutorials." We quickly realized that the Web site could also include the texts of essays used in the tutorials, scenario notes, and a Web-based response exercise. After obtaining a university grant to purchase a computer for editing and higher-end Web design, and with a borrowed DV camera in hand, students in the training class designed the five scenarios above and we began filming.

## A hidden agenda?

Our pedagogy for the project was straightforward, although we had goals beyond training tutors more effectively. We hoped that tutorial excellence would influence faculty to change some of their own bad habits.

First, we never intended to replace our face-to-face training in the Writing Center. As the class members discussed the project, we all felt that tutors-in-training should experience common frustrations and develop workable solutions for situations they might not encounter in their observations and apprentice tutorials. Following the advice given in Steve Sherwood's "Apprenticed to Failure," we decided that we should deliberately fail with some approaches and ask apprentices to reflect on why other tactics backfire. Including failures has worked well for others using video; Sobota's

informational videos for freshman writers include humorous moments when tutors provide bad advice or insult writers in a manner "exaggerated to highlight the absurdity of the actors' assumptions" (13). We also included several "over-the-top" failures, with writers storming out of the center, slamming doors behind them.

A second reason for the project was to train a staff that is widely dispersed and often not in touch with "home base" for weeks at a time. While the writing center has a regular staff of tutors, our WAC program uses "Writing Fellows," trained alongside the peer tutors, who work across campus after being assigned to classes. Preparing them for such independent work means giving them the most flexible training possible. We also have a goal of providing follow-up training for existing tutors and Fellows. With over 40 tutors and Writing Fellows working in a given semester, we find that ongoing training (timely e-mail, new Web resources, a printed newsletter) works better than mandatory staff meetings and seminars. We have found that even when we pay undergraduates to attend meetings, we are fortunate to get a 50% turnout.

We also wanted to impress our colleagues and superiors even as we alter their perceptions of how best to include and assess writing in their courses. Our Writing Center and WAC program are "sharers" rather than "seclusionists," as Michael Pemberton might call us (qtd. in Cogie 47). Our reports to professors emphasize the collaborative nature of peer tutorials: tutors and writers meet to discuss an essay; the faculty member gets a report—with notes from the tutor and writer—and a chance to ask tutors or the Writing Center Director any ques-

tions. Through the Web and other methods of publication, WAC and the Writing Center make faculty aware that *their* peers consider work with a tutor a sign of motivation, not of laziness or lack of ability. We are also proud to be perceived as using “cutting edge” technology for training tutors, even as we maintain a face-to-face tutoring operation (we do not yet have an OWL). On our campus as on most others, departments and programs increasingly compete for funding, space, and grants. By using technology judiciously and with students actively involved (a goal of the university’s strategic plan, we often note in funding requests), we gain the respect of colleagues, alumni, and administrators. We have a strong reputation as a unit that “does technology right,” and that has consistently helped us to increase our budget and obtain new equipment and facilities.

### The scenarios

The class filmed these five representative scenarios in Fall, 1999 and a few students helped to edit tape and produce the Web materials between January and August of 2000.

**The angry writer:** Laura, a freshman in a rigorous humanities course, hates the class, does not want to write a paper, thinks her professor gives vague assignments, yet has never had much trouble with writing before. Ann has to control her own emotional responses and somehow get Laura to care about her paper and about working with a peer tutor. We invented several patently bad reactions by Ann, including becoming angry at Laura (with Laura storming out), patronizing Laura too much, and criticizing the professor. More effective approaches from Ann include acknowledging Laura’s anger, focusing on the paper, and noting in an ethical manner that Ann, too, has had trouble in challenging classes.

**The fix-it shop:** Luke is in a terrible fix. Siobhan wants him to write her paper. Luke tries a variety of heuristics and tactics. Some of them backfire,

others work well. We probably filmed more approaches to this scenario than for any of the others; the actors had been in the same situation, especially with friends who came to them for help. The actors wanted to simulate the ways in which a tutor can get a writer to do her own work through the use of techniques such as glossing and nutshelling ideas, through asking a range of specific and general questions, and through using Rogerian techniques of repeating key words to the writer and then asking for more detail about these “code words” not fully explained in the essay (Flower 90-95). Bad techniques were easy to film: Luke did everything from breaking our honor code by writing the paper for Siobhan to overreacting to Siobhan’s request for unethical help, enraging her by repeating, in a condescending way, our policy on plagiarism.

**The reluctant revisor:** Lisa has always been rewarded for her work, but suddenly she has been sent to the Writing Center. Emma sees some areas for improvement in Lisa’s essay, but Lisa wants to cling to every word. Emma tries a number of techniques to acknowledge the strengths in the draft while showing Lisa that some areas remain unclear to her. Depending on Emma’s approach, Lisa either leaves overwhelmed and unsure about her writing ability or goes away from the tutorial confident, feeling that she has written a solid paper that requires some thoughtful reworking.

**The grammar tutorial:** A professor wants Bryan to get help with almost every grammatical rule. As Bryan rattles off the list of inexcusable errors from the professor’s referral form, Daisy sees different grammatical or other, less local patterns of rhetorical weakness in the essay. Daisy tries the effective approaches of working first with the most pressing rhetorical problems in the paper, then assisting Bryan with the most serious and repeated sentence-level errors. However, in other scenes intended to demonstrate poor practice, Daisy also offends Bryan by

insisting that his word processor has a grammar check and such work is beneath her. She also fails to use effectively our online writing handbook in one scene, while in another scene uses it effectively to reinforce a point and to give Bryan “something to take home.”

**The nontraditional student:** Susan has a busy life: children, job, volunteer work, classes. Her work for classes has become overwhelming. Hannah has a tough job because she does not have a lot of experience with older students. Hannah tries too hard to treat Susan like a peer, and this approach backfires as Hannah’s bland reassurances about “college” clash with Susan’s experience as a nontraditional student. In an alternative scene, Hannah approaches Susan professionally and works on specific aspects of the paper. Yet another scene has Hannah trying to address every problem in Susan’s work and overwhelming her with advice. This scene contrasts with others in which Hannah focuses her advice and Susan responds more favorably.

### The process of making the videos

After the student teams had selected the five scenarios, they divided the tasks for the filming. Two students worked as actors, and another provided the paper (with intentional errors) that became the basis for the tutorial. Two other students wrote scripts and a variety of storyboards. Each storyboard charted the course of the tutorial using a series of cartoon images and dialog boxes, and at every point where a tutor could try a different tactic, the designers sketched out the results. We then shot film for each panel on the storyboards.

For the day of filming, we have asked the actors to study—but not memorize—the dialogue in the scripts. The student and faculty “crew” asked the students to improvise dialogue for each scene sketched out in the storyboard, paying careful attention to any “rich bits” of dialogue from the scripts and using only those words verbatim. We had not expected such good acting from the students. Their success probably came from their experience as tutors. By the day of filming, everyone in

the training class had worked as an apprentice tutor for nearly a semester. This on-the-job experience let the tutors simulate the give-and-take of a difficult tutorial very effectively.

Several “takes” were done for certain scenes. In the weeks following the filming, a Writing Fellow reviewed all the tape and noted which takes worked best, which had good moments, and which went in *Media 100*'s “blooper bin.” We then began the process of digitizing the film and making the *Quicktime* movies now available. At the same time, we worked out the fine points of the Web design, finally settling on the graphics and menus now used. We tested a mock-up of the site with as many versions of *Netscape* and *Explorer* as we could, both on PCs and Macs.

### Technological aspects of the project:

We put this aspect of the project last, because we believe that pedagogy should drive technological choices. After deciding our purposes for the scenarios and the ways in which readers would interact with the materials, we turned to Web design.

We wanted a completely Web-based project using off-the-shelf, free technologies that could work on any modern PC or Mac browser, such as *Quicktime* and standard HTML tags. Our primary audience on campus has a lot of “bandwidth” available (T1 connections in all buildings and dorms) and most students now have computers in their rooms. For this primary audience we developed a “high bandwidth” version of the project in which each video scene ranges between 5 and 40 megabytes. For off-campus audiences with slower network connections, we began work on a “low bandwidth” version with video scenes compressed to about 1/5 the size of the on-campus videos.

We discovered that even the “low bandwidth” version does not work well over a modem. This occurs since our campus Web server does not fully support streaming video at high speeds. Even when the Writing Center brings its own streaming video server online next year (something

that will better support those with modem access), we will provide by request CD-ROM versions of the low-bandwidth version at our cost plus a few dollars, to those requesting them.

We have been asked by several people at conferences or on campus, impressed by the quality of the video scenes, whether we would soon “take the project commercial.” We answer with a resounding “NO” every time. Granted, a commercialized project under the aegis of a large academic publishing house might gain a more professional level of design and a wider audience. We anticipated, however, a free or “shareware” product that writing center professionals and tutors could employ in their training. In the cyberpunk spirit that “information wants to be free,” we will continue to take advantage of our campus’ ample resources and share our intellectual property. Frankly, we fear that a commercial publisher might simply price an enhanced version of our project beyond the reach of centers with small budgets. On the other hand, the free or low-cost Web and CD versions produced by us fit the collaborative model of writing center work and the free exchange of ideas and best practices among teacher-scholars like ourselves.

### Other design notes

Those contemplating a similar project should be forewarned that a heavy investment of time is needed. The filming itself was a joy: we completed all five scenarios in eight hours of filming one weekend. We even hired a caterer to provide food and had members of the groups help on “the set” with adding scenes, critiquing the story-board, and setting up camera angles and lighting. Then the time-consuming part began. Although *Media 100* and the related video equipment we used are not terribly difficult to master, we spent over 100 hours from January to July 2000 marking tape, coding the Web pages, digitizing scenes, assembling the edited clips, and compressing the video master copies with the *Media Cleaner Pro* soft-

ware. Without two Writing Fellows assigned to help, the project would have been nearly impossible to complete in two semesters.

For the “broadband” version of the videos, we set the frame rate for the compression at 30 and the audio at 44.1 Khz. These settings provided good results, conveying the body language and nuances of speech used in the scenarios. The videos became much larger than we planned, of course; we had the naive idea that the entire project would fit on a single CD-ROM, but in fact barely 10% of the broadband version would fit. When preparing the “lowband” copies of the videos, we reset compression to 8 frames per second, keyframes at one frame in four, and audio to 11 Khz. We have burned a few copies of the “lowband” version, and it neatly fits onto a CD-ROM. As the project expands to 11 scenarios next year, we anticipate providing a dual-platform CD with compressed versions of the files.

We chose Apple’s *Quicktime* for delivering the video. We had also considered *Realplayer*, but we found that *Quicktime* offers a less-restrictive licensing for streaming the video over our campus network. Given our desire to make these materials widely available on campus and free or at very low cost to others, we decided to try *Quicktime* as a good cross-platform solution.

### What we could not do

Our intention had been to capture many different approaches to a difficult moment in a tutorial. We found, however, that our storyboards were not detailed enough. While filming we asked the actors to brainstorm, and they quickly devised other scenes that we then shot. This added some depth, but we still did not achieve the “choose your own adventure” multiplicity of outcomes we had originally imagined. We also could not capture every possible outcome in a given situation. Following our own best instincts as peer tutors, we decided that we would present common outcomes for given tutorial strategies.

## The Writing Lab Newsletter

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### Next steps

In the Fall 2000 training course, apprentice tutors designed and filmed six additional scenarios for:

- An ESL student (not *all* ESL students, but a Japanese writer new to the thesis-support pattern of American academic prose)
- A demoralized writer
- A friend who wants tutoring (shot “on location” in a noisy, cluttered dorm room)
- A writer with an offensive paper
- A student athlete
- A writer with a strong paper.

The ESL tutorial presents special challenges. A Japanese student volunteered to act in the scenario, and she is very sensitive to the needs of our second-language population on campus. We want to avoid cultural stereotypes (lumping together all “Asian” writers) while showing tutors how different educational backgrounds influence writers’ ideas in areas such as the structure of papers, the use of digressions, and the citation of sources. As a longer-term goal, we would like to extend our ser-

vices as video editors to our first-year composition program. We hope to develop a set of online exercises to help peer-critique groups work together more effectively. This project might include multiple drafts of essays, videos of group interaction, and write-to-learn exercises for students.

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