

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 30, Number 5

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

January, 2006

...FROM THE EDITOR...

Ah, the best laid plans. . . . We had hoped to have our updated format for the *Writing Lab Newsletter* ready for the new year to surprise (and, we hope, delight) you. But the various complications (including my learning some new software to do the page layout work and prepare the issue for the printer, pricing considerations buried somewhere in a sea of university red tape, etc.) are causing a delay. And, to assure those of you who are fond of “the fancy ‘@’” in the nameplate, we have no intentions of leaving it behind in the new design. THAT stays!

In the meantime, this issue of *WLN* focuses tightly on the tutor and student interaction. Ted Remington examines the complexities of a tutor meeting a student through e-mail and the dynamic the tutor has to shape in that environment. Bonnie Devet shares a handout and her experience in training tutors to work with writers of fiction. In a scenario with a student who seems tuned out from the tutorial, Rian Brarmann reminds us that the student may actually be listening. Although the literature of writing centers is intent on examining tutor/student dialogue, Kathi Griffin and her tutors consider tutorials in which the instructor is part of the conversation.

• *Muriel Harris, editor*

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Reading, writing, and the role of the online tutor

We’ve all seen it. A student sends us an essay that’s due the next day. She assures us that she’s followed the teacher’s instructions, used plenty of quotations, and met the length requirements. All she’s looking for are what so many students who submit their essays for e-mail tutoring want: a quick look at the paper for spelling, grammar (usually spelled “grammer”), and to make sure the essay “flows.”

On reading the first paragraph, however, we find there’s only a vague sense of what the topic of the paper is, and no evidence of a specific, central claim or how it will be supported. How am I as a tutor supposed to respond to a request for a spot check to fine tune the essay when as a reader, I can’t discern a recognizable thesis?

This isn’t a difficulty that’s particular to e-mail tutoring. It’s a familiar experience for anyone who’s done one-on-one writing instruction of any sort. But there’s a widely held assumption that this sort of disconnect between student expectations and a tutor’s diagnosis is especially hard to negotiate in an online environment. The relatively

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Manuscripts: Submission guidelines are available on the *WLN* Web site. Recommended length for articles is approximately 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutors' Column essays, in MLA format. If possible, please send as attached files in an e-mail to wln@purdue.edu. Otherwise, send hard copy and a computer disk or CD-ROM, and please enclose a self-addressed envelope with return postage not pasted to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 30 days prior to the month of issue (e.g. Sept. 1 for an October issue).

static nature of the interaction, often simply involving a single e-mail from each participant, seems to offer less chance for the back-and-forth hashing out of such issues that an in-person meeting allows.

There's more than some truth to this. Yet, the longer I do e-mail tutoring, the more aware I become of its possibilities rather than its limitations. In fact, I've come to see some of the apparent obstacles involved in e-mail tutoring as opportunities. Specifically, there's a certain ethos that's created for the tutor in the online environment that's difficult to duplicate in face-to-face tutoring.

In particular, I believe that interacting with a student in the very medium that's the subject of this interaction, writing, brings with it inherent possibilities and strengths. These possibilities fall into two general categories defined by the roles the tutor plays in an e-mail tutoring session: reader and writer.

The tutor as reader

Probably all of us have had the experience of reading a student paper that uses phrases such as, "As we discussed in class, Shakespeare uses a lot of symbolism in this sonnet," or "Just as you said in your lecture, many causes contributed to the Mexican-American War." This makes plenty of sense. After all, most student papers are written for an audience of one: their professor. The idea of going through the motions of addressing a larger readership is counterintuitive, particularly to a first-semester freshman.

Yet a central component of teaching college writing is getting students to mimic the qualities of academic discourse in which authors write to a wide audience of intelligent readers who are also versed in the rhetorical practices of scholarly debate. Students are often penalized for writing in a

way that assumes they know what they in fact do know: the only person who will read their paper is the person with the red pen and the grade book.

As a tutor, describing the odd charade of addressing an audience beyond the classroom can be difficult. But the particular characteristics of e-mail tutoring can help. After all, the relationship between a student author and an e-mail tutor resembles the rhetorical situation college teachers ask their students to imagine themselves in. The student is addressing an anonymous audience, unfamiliar with the specifics of the classroom environment (lectures, discussions, textbooks), but also presumably with an appreciation for scholarly writing and a familiarity for what constitutes the "rules" of this kind of discourse. The author knows the reader will look at their work with a critical eye, quick to notice jumps in logic, unsupported claims, or sloppy expression, but at the same time not someone with any direct authority over the writer. Just as a seasoned academic sends a journal article or conference paper out into the world to do its work, so does the student using e-mail tutoring send her paper into a public space to do its work on an audience. Both authors hope that their work will be considered seriously, be well received, and elicit thoughtful responses from readers.

Because an e-mail interaction usually depends solely on the information the tutor gleans from the paper itself, an e-mail tutor is in a position to more authentically play the role of the interested but abstract reader.

When I begin my comments to a student, I often preface my observations with the phrase, "As a reader, I" My purpose in phrasing my responses this way is two-fold. First, by referring to myself as a reader, I hope that I diminish, at least slightly, the emphasis on the power relationship inherent in the tutoring relationship (i.e., teacher/student, professional/novice, etc.).

This is something I try to do in face-to-face tutoring, but the medium of e-mail allows this to be done in a purer way. When a student physically comes to the writing center and sits down with a tutor, there is the sense of “coming to get help” from a tutor who is usually noticeably older.

E-mail tutoring allows the tutor to assume the role of the intended audience with less of the additional complexities that come with interpersonal interaction. Such complexities are often pleasant and can be helpful in the tutoring relationship, but they also diminish the ability to recreate the academic rhetorical situation we ask students to address.

A second, and related, purpose is to emphasize for students the notion that the way they use language directly affects their audience’s experience of the essay. In an e-mail tutoring situation, there is less opportunity for a student to preface her comments with an explanation of the “Here’s what I’m trying to say” variety. I’m able to respond more sincerely and believably as an abstract reader than when I’m sitting down with a student who has an opportunity to frame the text with lots of explanatory commentary. What I know of the student and her ideas is based almost solely on the text itself. When I describe my reaction to the text, I’m not assuming a role, and the student knows this. I’m not saying, “If I were one of your readers;” I *am* one of her readers.

So, after I’ve read the introduction and I comment that it’s not clear to me what the essay’s central claim is and I feel unsure of what’s coming up, students have a sense (a genuine one, I hope) that their words have an effect on their oh-so-human readership. Suggestions made by the tutor take on a slightly less prescriptive tone, and more an initial read of whether or not the essay is successfully accomplishing its purpose. I can say honestly what I as a reader feel is most needed from

the author for her to accomplish her goal. To the extent my suggestion about clarifying a thesis sentence doesn’t match the expectations of an author who feels all she needs is a quick grammar check, the tutor-as-reader dynamic allows this gap to be negotiated in a way that comes from a place of honesty for the tutor and encourages a motivated reexamination of the text by its author, rather than simply following a list of shoulds and shouldn’ts.

The tutor as writer

When sitting down with a student at a table and having a conference on a paper, our conversation takes on an unavoidable “meta” aspect. The writing becomes an object, something to be contemplated, commented on, and altered. The spoken word is privileged as the means with which to communicate ways in which the written word can be controlled and improved. The process of writing is something that is talked about during a tutoring session, not something that is done.

In an online tutoring session, however, I correspond with the student in writing. The two of us participate in the process we’re discussing. While there’s still a “meta” aspect to the interaction (the student’s paper is still described and talked about by what the student and I say about the paper), there is also a self-referential component that’s missing in the in-person tutoring session.

At first, this distinction seems like a mildly interesting theoretical observation—there’s something vaguely deconstructionist about the idea of escaping the privileging of the spoken word over the written and the self-referential nature of language. But coffee-house philosophizing aside, there are concrete and helpful lessons in tutoring that emerge from recognizing this aspect of online interaction.

As a tutor, the most important of these is the idea of the tutor as model.

When responding to a student via e-mail, I can’t stand outside the process I’m commenting on and give advice at arm’s length. I am by definition demonstrating the skills I discuss. I might not write a five-paragraph essay in response to a student’s request for help, but I am writing, and given the ethos that comes with the title “tutor,” I’m aware that a student will assume, consciously or not, that my writing is an example of how writing is supposed to be done.

There’s no escape from the position of role-model. One cannot opt out of a position that is determined solely by the student’s perspective. The solution is to take an inherent part of the online tutoring experience and use it as an instructional tool.

Implicit modeling

The most obvious way of using this self-referential aspect of the online tutoring dynamic to advantage is simply for me to be aware of the way I use language when responding to a student. At the very least, this means making sure I proofread my response after I’ve composed it but before I hit the “send mail” command. When there are a dozen papers in the inbox from students who want comments on papers that are due tomorrow, it’s tempting to take a “churn and burn” approach and simply fire off responses the second I type the last comment. But stylistic and grammatical sloppiness undercuts the tutor’s ethos and sends conflicting messages to the student: it’s important for *you* to turn in an error-free paper, and if you don’t, your grade will suffer; *I*, on the other hand, can be as lackadaisical as I want, in spite of (or because of) my status as a writing authority. This makes no sense.

I can’t expect a student to take my admonition to not rely on Microsoft Word’s spell check function to catch typos if I’ve spelled “to” as “too.” I’ve also found myself on more than one occasion unintentionally composing such sage advice as the following comment:

Your sentences tend to have the same structure. You should try to create more variety in your sentences. Sentences that repeat words or phrases can sound mechanical. Sentences that are all the same length also make writing seem dull. You should vary the wording and length of your sentences more.

Tutor, heal thyself! By taking the time to check for basic errors in grammar and spelling, as well as not being satisfied with simply communicating ideas but striving to communicate them skillfully (in other words, by following the advice we give to students), we teach by example. It's true that these examples are often only learned subconsciously by students, and it's difficult to work up the energy or passion to compose a stylistic *tour-de-force* of a response to the seventh paper on the death penalty or the wonders of sorority life that I've read that day. But at a minimum, being aware of the fact that our own writing practices can either undercut or amplify our comments helps us communicate the importance of many of the subtler aspects of the writing process that students rarely seek overt commentary on.

Explicit modeling

While implicit modeling is inherent in the e-mail tutoring dynamic, explicit modeling is a particular tool that tutors can choose to employ if the situation warrants. By explicit modeling, I mean calling attention to one's own writing as an example. Instead of hoping a student will subliminally soak up good writing habits through exposure to the tutor's (hopefully) well-crafted prose, the tutor provides examples of specific writing skills (or foibles), and points to them as illustrations.

The advantage here is again the fact that as a tutor, I am communicating in

the medium I'm discussing. For example, rather than simply tell a student that her second paragraph contains several sentences that are repetitive in their wording and structure and explaining that this can distract or bore a reader, I can provide an example of a brief paragraph with stereotypically monotonous sentences. Instead of invoking some bit of conventional wisdom about the overuse of adjectives and adverbs, I can show the student an example of a very long and wordy sentence that clearly and emphatically demonstrates that unnecessary, redundant, and repetitive modifiers can very often clutter and bog down what otherwise might likely be a relatively clear and possibly even important statement of an extremely critical idea.

Beyond the fact that this approach follows the age-old writing adage of showing rather than telling, there are at least two particular advantages explicit modeling offers me as a tutor. First, by using examples that are not drawn from the student's own work, as well as taking some artistic license by exaggerating the quality I'm illustrating, I give the student a chance to have some critical distance that's difficult to achieve when looking at one's own work. Getting students to see stylistic weaknesses in their own work can often be like trying to talk someone into seeing the image in one of those computer generated three-dimensional art prints. Explicit modeling often provides the needed perspective.

Secondly, injunctions to avoid ornate language, use specific and concrete nouns and verbs, use parallel structures, etc. aren't simply stated as commandments coming from a disembodied authority figure as arbitrary rules that must be followed to maximize a grade. By illustrating the advantages of applying these principles, the tutor can get the student to understand not only the guideline, but the reasoning behind it. The student experiences the affect

these choices have on the reader. With any luck, this can lead to an "a-ha" moment when they apply this experience to their own writing.

One example that springs to mind was a student who sent an essay for a writing class accompanied by a note that said his teacher liked his writing, but consistently marked him down in for repetitious sentence construction. He seemed baffled both by what his instructor meant as well as how to go about fixing this "problem" his instructor insisted he had.

As I read his submission, I had an idea. Instead of trying to describe the repetition in the abstract, I wrote the following.

In your sentences, I've noticed that you use a certain pattern. It's not wrong, but can be distracting when overused. After an introductory phrase, you have a comma and a main clause. The sentence goes up, then pauses and comes back down. As you see, this repetition can be almost hypnotic. Blah blah blah blah, blah blah blah blah blah.

The danger of explicit modeling is that if done too much or with no sense of audience, it can end up coming across like mean-spirited parody. In the case of this student, I felt confident that this would not be taken as cruel since I had worked with him before and we had built a good rapport. A day or two later, I received probably the most enthusiastic thank-you note I've ever received from a student. He declared that he had experienced a "breakthrough" in his writing, and that suddenly the comments of his instructor made sense and he understood exactly what he needed to work on.

Of course, this interaction could, in theory, have happened over a table in the writing center rather than over e-mail. But when in the company of a live student, I would be much more

likely to try explaining sentence structure in the abstract or attempting to get him to see the repetitious nature of his own sentences by using his writing as an example. I'd be much less likely to take the time to stop the tutoring session, think up several sentences that mimicked his sentence structure, write them down, and then hand them to him. In this case, e-mail tutoring provided an opportunity for learning that would likely have gone unrealized in an in-person environment.

By responding not simply as an authority figure, but as an interested reader, and by not invoking abstract rules, but demonstrating the effects of specific writing choices on a reader,

my hope is that I've pointed out and illustrated a way for students to improve their writing based not on tutorial edict or academic hoop-jumping, but on what the student's goal is: to communicate ideas effectively.

Is the medium the message?

This isn't to say that online tutoring is superior to "live" tutoring, nor that attempts to bring the strengths of one mode of tutoring to bear on another mode are misplaced or doomed to failure. The medium is not the message, at least not entirely. But the medium certainly affects the message, and often lends itself particularly well to certain kinds of messages. In the case of

online tutoring, I'd simply point out that differences in the rhetorical situation between sending e-mail and sitting at a table with a student do present difficulties and necessitate changes in tutorial tactics. But at the same time, online tutoring can be (and is) more than a weak imitation of the "real" tutoring that goes on inside a writing center. In particular, the ability to interact via writing allows for the student to be more fully immersed in both the role of writer and reader, and in the process, play both roles with greater élan.

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National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing

Call for Papers
November 10-12, 2006
Ann Arbor, Michigan
"Negotiating Authority in the Writing Center"

The Gayle Morris Sweetland Writing Center at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, seeks proposals for 75-minute sessions that consider practical, historical and theoretical aspects of the theme of authority in the writing center. We emphasize tutor-led, active presentations providing the opportunity for audience interaction and/or discussion. Applicants should submit a one-page proposal (250 words) and an abstract (50 words) no later than April 10, 2006. Proposals should include the kind (workshop, panel, individual) and length of presentation, name, affiliation and e-mail address of presenter(s), and title of the presentation. Send these materials as attachments to NCPTW06@umich.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc/NCPTW/>>.

Northern California Writing Center Association Conference

Call for Proposals
March 4, 2006
Sacramento, CA
"Finding Common Ground: Forging Connections Among Diverse Writing Communities"
Keynote speaker: Paula Gillespie

Pre-Conference Workshop on Friday, March 3, 2006: "Centering and Re-Centering: New Beginnings for Writing Centers in Challenging Times" (a repeat of our popular workshop for writing center administrators and staff held at the 2004 NCWCA conference).

Information about submitting proposals as well as registration for both the conference and the workshop available at the NCWCA conference Web site: <<http://ic.arc.losrios.edu/~ncwca/>>. *Extended* Deadline for Proposals: January 10, 2006. Contact Information: Susan McCall, Department of English, American River College, 4700 College Oak Drive, Sacramento, CA 95841, (916) 484-8312, mccalls@arc.losrios.edu.

Training writing lab consultants to help fiction writers

Writing labs are supersizing. Only ten years ago, labs at colleges and universities would have been considered successful if they were helping students in the usual writing classes, that is, students struggling with a literary analysis of Iago in freshman English or history majors writing about the causes of the Iraqi Wars for a senior seminar. Now, labs are widening the scope of what constitutes “help” to include assisting writers who are designing a Web site in hypertext markup language, writers who are organizing an oral presentation in PowerPoint, and writers who are analyzing a visual text like a bar graph for a business statistics course.

Another type of writing community is becoming prominent on college campuses. Our college, like many others, is now offering an English major with a concentration in creative writing, a major designed to generate more English majors and to foster an appreciation for poetry, short stories, and creative non-fiction. For the last two years, as the creative writing concentration has evolved, the College of Charleston Writing Lab has been preparing to work with this new target population by developing a philosophy of tutoring and establishing specific strategies for best assisting all types of creative writers. Here, I would like to share just one aspect of what our lab has accomplished: how directors can train tutors to help a segment of this new population—fiction writers.

When training consultants, directors must address a major problem. Consultants often feel intimidated by fiction writers. When a short story writer enters the lab, tutors immediately feel, “Oh, no, a creative writer! And she’s written a *short story*! Wow! Who am I to think I can help someone so origi-

nal?!” This feeling of inadequacy arises because tutors have taken many English classes where literature—treated as a “product”—is revered and honored and even worshiped. No wonder consultants feel intimidated by students touched by the muses. Directors, recognizing this fear, must guide tutors past it by providing them with specific techniques to help a client with a piece of fiction.

Luckily, my lab had employed the consultant Alicia Hatter, who was enrolled in creative writing classes as a star student. To help her fellow tutors, she created a training handout designed to aid consultants, not necessarily to be given to clients. After all, how can the creative process be reduced to a mere two-or-three page handout (Davis)? Placed in the tutoring manual, the sheet, entitled simply “Fiction Writers,” offers questions so tutors can be the types of readers creative writers desire and need. Inspired, in part, by a *Dangling Modifier* article from the Cedarville University (Ohio) tutors Jennifer E. Hime and Karen J. Mowrer, the “Fiction Writers” handout suggests tutors look for aspects of the fiction listed in the handout. (See pages 7-8.)

As the questions on the handout show, the training sheet fosters in the fiction writer what Donald Murray has called “the other self”: the good judge of writing inside each person is made stronger and more independent (69) by someone (like a teacher or consultant). The short story writer, then, becomes the critic of her own work, a tutorial goal desirable in any type of consultation.

After going over the sheet, directors should, then, use the tried-and-true training technique of role-playing. Having secured short stories from stu-

dent writers (former consultants who volunteer their works are good sources), directors can pass out the stories by students (names removed, of course), pair off consultants (with one being a client and the other a tutor), and ask tutors to role play with each other, using the handout to guide them as they ask clients questions. After a few practice sessions, consultants should be less apprehensive in working with fiction writers.

Conclusion

The rest of the campus may see labs as imperialists, endlessly colonizing new target student populations, claiming that they can help all writers, from the inexperienced freshman struggling with Shakespeare to the history major analyzing the Gulf Wars. Expanding services to include fiction writers could be seen as labs’ carving out more territory. Are labs, then, overreaching? It does not seem so. Helping fiction writers is a natural extension of a lab’s services, a chance to offer these special writers a place to receive a skilled, fresh reaction to their short stories. Helping them also reaffirms what was so well expressed long ago by that still rousing yet seminal article by Stephen North: “We are not here to serve, supplement, back up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum. We are here to talk to writers” (72). Talking to fiction writers is, indeed, part of a lab’s all-important mission.

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(continued on page 9)

Fiction Writers

A handout from the Writing Lab at the College of Charleston—South Carolina

Perhaps the most useful asset for a creative writer is a good, attentive reader. This reader, whether or not versed in the many theories behind creative writing, can look at each work and make informed criticism based on certain universal ideas. Listed below is what readers of fiction and fiction writers themselves could bear in mind in order to evaluate a piece objectively.

Are there elements of the writing that engage the reader or provide reasons to continue reading?

Because fiction should be enjoyable to read, the reader should be able to get so involved in the story that he almost forgets he is reading. Writers should, therefore, not remind the reader that he is reading by including gimmicky phrases to persuade the reader to keep going. An example of such a trick is as follows: "I was eighteen when it happened. It is a scar on myself that will not heal. I was only just a man, and I failed myself. I failed everyone. It was not by action but by inaction that I failed us." Here, the reader follows the sentences expecting something—namely, to find out what "it" is. This leading-on of the reader could continue in this way indefinitely. It is best to get to the point and to have that be sufficient reason for continual reading. In fact, good writing will keep the reader engaged through the use of intriguing plot, deep character development, and original images.

Does the piece use words correctly? Are certain words overused? Is the diction appropriate for the tone that the writer has established?

For a piece to be well-received, it is crucial that a writer establish a bond of trust with her reader. Nothing disturbs this trust more than incorrect word usage. Of course, at times this can serve a purpose, as is evidenced, for instance, in the rendering of a young character who is still getting a feel for the language. However, if incorrect word choice does not develop the character or the story at large, it is probably an authorial error and should be corrected. The writer should also avoid using clichés as much as possible. She should strive to make her work as original as possible. This will help build trust between the reader and herself.

Also, the reader should be aware that certain words such as "very" and "that" are often overused and, in many cases, can be deleted without harming the integrity of the piece.

Finally, it is important for the writer to stay in touch with a character that she has created. For example, it would probably not be appropriate for a character with Alzheimer's to speak in long strings of complex sentences, for this would not be true to the reality of the disorienting disease.

Are there memorable images? Do the images try too hard to be symbolic? Is there an appeal to both the imagination and the intellect?

Generally, a story's best images stick in the reader's mind long after finishing the reading. However, even without applying this test of time, good images will be readily apparent to the reader, who should acknowledge them as such.

Rather than “telling” through abstractions, writers should **show** by using concrete images. However, because this method can often leave the writer feeling that his work lacks meaning, the writer should never force meaning onto his work or to include consciously symbolic images. An example of an image that was not intended to be symbolic is Joy-Hulga’s wooden leg in Flannery O’Connor’s story “Good Country People.” Had O’Connor intended the leg to symbolize the girl’s ironic vulnerability and insecurity in the face of the worldly Bible salesman, it is likely that the image would have come off as contrived and would not have had the profound impact on the story that it did.

Having an appeal to both the imagination and the intellect is synonymous with the work’s having meaning. A good story will be more than just a story and more than the sum of its parts, with the meaning arising organically not coming in the form of a sudden “train wreck” at the end.

Is the ending of the work too neat? Does the ending seem contrived? Does the reader come away from the piece with something thought-provoking or with a different feeling about the world?

The temptation for novice writers is to conclude their stories by resolving any ambiguities or tensions that appeared within the work. However, since fiction is meant to capture the quality of real life in a unique way, and since life does not resolve its complications neatly at the end of each day, fiction should mimic life’s example and leave certain things open to imagination and to interpretation. This is not to say, however, that the ending should be vague. On the contrary, if things are left open, the reader should be able to understand why, and to have a feeling of closure because of that understanding.

The best endings will transpire effortlessly. If the ending does happen naturally, the reader leaves the story satisfied, of having reading something that either affirmed, challenged, or changed his view of things. This is the best outcome a fiction writer can hope to achieve. However, if the author has an ending in mind even before the piece has begun, then all of his work will be devoted to getting to that ending. Chances are, the story will turn out to be plot-driven rather than character-driven, and will lack meaning.

Is it apparent that the writer has an emotional stake in the work?

A writer should be as deeply involved in her story as she is in the living of her life. If the author is apathetic toward the piece, the reader will know, since the story is likely to be as uninteresting as one would expect from a detached author. In addition to being deeply involved in the writing of the work, the author should not be afraid to take emotional risks. Creating an unlikable character, for instance, is a good way for the writer to explore the less-than-desirable qualities of both himself and the world at large. Readers will generally be more receptive to a risk-taking author as opposed to a safe one.

****Please bear in mind that all of the rules can be broken at any point. No work of fiction will be great because it strictly adhered to all the rules. The above should help beginning writers still searching for their artistic voices. It is hoped that these points will aid in achieving that end, at which point, the rules can and should be abandoned.**

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Kathleen Cain and Michael Rossi Win 2005 Maxwell Distinguished Leadership Award

Kathleen Shine Cain, Professor of English and alternating Director of the Merrimack College Writing Center, and Michael J. Rossi, Dean of Liberal Arts, Professor of English, and alternating Director of the Merrimack College Writing Center, won as a collaborative pair the 2005 NCPTW Ron Maxwell Award for Distinguished Leadership in Promoting the Collaborative Learning Practices of Peer Tutors in Writing. The award recognizes dedication to and leadership in collaborative learning in writing centers, for aiding students in together taking on more responsibility for their learning, and, thus, for promoting the work of peer tutors. The award also denotes extraordinary service to the evolution of the conference organization.

The award was presented on October 21, 2005, by 2004 Maxwell Award winner Harvey Kail at the joint conference of the International Writing Centers Association and the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Professors Cain and Rossi were given a warm and extended standing ovation by the nearly seven hundred people in attendance at the conference luncheon, fitting testimony to the high regard in which they are held.

In recognizing Cain and Rossi together, the awards committee, made up of five previous winners, wanted to celebrate the collaborators' individual contributions to peer tutoring and collaborative learning while also recognizing the very special tradition of excellence in collaborative learning at the Merrimack College Writing Center. In their work together, as well as with former Merrimack professor Albert DeCiccio and current

writing center directors Deborah Burns and Kathy Dube, Cain and Rossi have modeled for their colleagues nationwide how to build a writing center program based on collaborative practices and shared values about the teaching of writing. Someone who nominated Cain and Rossi for the award said that "their support of peer tutoring is unwavering and continually seeks new avenues They are a team and they should be honored together."

Another nominator noted, "They have been generous with their time, supportive of the organization in many ways, and patient and shrewd strategists."

Cain and Rossi hosted the seventeenth annual conference at Merrimack College in 2000, putting Merrimack in the same tradition with previous hosts such as Muhlenberg College, Skidmore College, Georgetown University, Purdue University, the University of Kansas, and the Pennsylvania State University, to name just a few since Brown University hosted the first in 1983. Both Cain and Rossi were among the founders of the conference tradition. As an NCPTW colleague recalls, "It is hard to think about the peer tutoring conference's birth without Kathy as the midwife and Mike to pass out cigars, smiling so broadly that he can barely speak."

Through their work in the NCPTW, Kathleen Cain and Michael Rossi have become nationally recognized leaders in promoting the value of educating students to take one another seriously and work together effectively as writers and thinkers.

TUTORS' COLUMN

Are they listening?

Working with students who are assigned to the writing center creates unique opportunities and challenges. Tutoring a student who is not pleased about being tutored requires adapting techniques. It is important to be aware that even though students may have a negative attitude towards the session, they may in fact still be listening.

Early on in writing center sessions, it is usually easy to determine if the visit was mandatory. If students have been required to make an appointment, they may frequently even tell you and, for the most part, these students are open to suggestions as to how to improve their work. The sessions are usually no different than if the students had come to the center on their own accord. For first-time students, I have found it helpful to explain the services the writing center offers and how sessions are usually conducted. I do this because before I became a tutor I was unaware of what occurred within the writing center walls. Many of these students will schedule follow up appointments on their own which shows that they find the service useful in improving their work. The professor's goal is thus achieved.

However, this is not always the case. Occasionally, students who are assigned to the center may only attend in order to keep professors pleased. These students may have no interest in the services offered or want to take part in a tutoring session. I have asked students why they may feel this way but have not been given a concrete answer. Many of the students simply feel that a trip to the writing center is not going to help them much. If they have received

a poor grade, then they may also feel ashamed of speaking about it. The result is that you are faced with tutoring a student who does not care about what you are saying and is just trying to get through the session as painlessly as possible. At least, this is what I thought at first.

I have had ample opportunity to work with a student who falls into this category. Her Composition II professor assigned her to the writing center. She is part of a college-wide developmental skills program for incoming freshmen that helps students make the transition from high school to college by providing them with the skills they will need. The student I worked with is required to make appointments on a regular basis, usually weekly. From the moment she walked into the center, it was very apparent that her appointment was mandatory. Upon entering the room that Thursday morning, she took a glance around and asked where I was by calling out my name. She then explained to me and everyone else in the room that she has had "bad" past experiences with the writing center and cannot understand why she is there. As you can imagine, I wanted nothing more than for this session to be over as quickly as possible.

I began the session as I normally would. I asked questions about her class, professor, past assignments, and so on. I tried to find out more about her previous visits but nothing came out. Gradually, I turned my attention to the assignment she was currently working on. After a few minutes of rumbling through her bag, she pulled out a piece of crumpled paper. I attempted to

speak with her about the assignment, but I began getting frustrated with her one-word responses to my questions. I then asked if she had started writing the paper and if it was possible for me to take a look at her work. She was apprehensive at first, but eventually handed it to me. I read the paper and began by pointing out the areas that I thought were strongly written, a technique I learned early on. In this situation, this was probably not the best idea. She said, "I knew I didn't have to be here" and seemed to shy away even more. I quickly informed her that there were also areas in her work that we could focus on improving.

I noticed right away that her structure could use some attention and began trying to discuss it with her. Normally, I try to encourage the student to determine areas of their work that may need help by asking them questions. It was easy to see that this strategy would probably not be the most successful. I instead pulled examples from her paper to show the points I was trying to make. As I did this, she would come up with quick reasons why I could be wrong. She also began asking me questions regarding the use of grammar that I was not ashamed to say I did not have the answers for. She was apparently trying to prove to me that she knew what she was doing. It was almost like she was challenging me for the position of tutor. I just listened to her remarks, offered my opinions, and kept going. My goal was at least to give her an idea of what areas might need improvement. After all, even though her comments were often negative, they at least offered some evidence to me that she was listening.

Exactly one week later she walked into the writing center once again, this time without an appointment. I was available to help her and asked what she would like to work on. She pulled out the same paper from the week before. After flipping through the first few pages, I immediately noticed changes to the way it was organized. Some of the ideas she disagreed with in the session, she used in her paper. When I reached the last page I saw her professors comments and her grade. One of the comments was, "Great job on structure." That whole time she was in fact listening and benefiting from the first session.

Strangely enough, this session went on the same as the previous one. With the help of her professor's comments, I spoke to her about the different issues. She once again, quickly refuted just about everything I said. Occasionally, however, I would catch her making notes on a second piece of paper. Her secrecy proved to me that she did not

want me to know she was gaining anything from the sessions.

My original assumption that these students were not listening was proven wrong. Often times, the students may value the help and input but do not want you, as the tutor, to know they need it. In this case, I later determined that the student had never been to the writing center before. By making her remarks as she entered the room, she may have been protecting her image. Students in developmental skills programs have been selected out of the general student body as students who need extra help, and in some cases, this alone is enough to make them feel inferior. They may also feel they are going to the writing center because their writing is poor. When students in this position are sent to the writing center, they become defensive, especially if they have spent a long time working on what they bring. In this situation, offer your reasons for comments. After a while, I began getting used to the de-

bates and found that they even helped me question my own writing.

Irene Clark states that, "Requiring students to visit the writing center at least gives them a chance to be encouraged. And with the right encouragement, even the most recalcitrant horse, aware of his thirst and standing at the water's edge, might bend his stubborn neck and take a drink" (257). As tutors, it is our goal to provide this encouragement. In most cases, patience and adaptability are keys for success. The student may not always follow the advice in your presence, but still may be benefiting from the experience.

Rian A. Brarmann
Salem State College
Salem, MA

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Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

February 16-18, 2006: Southeastern Writing Centers Association, in Chapel Hill, NC

Contact: Kim Abels, e-mail: kabels@email.unc.edu and Vicki Russell vgr@duke.edu. Conference Web site: <http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio/swca/>.

February 23-25, 2006: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Little Rock, AR

Contact: Allison Denman Holland, e-mail: adholland@ualr.edu; phone: 501-569-8311. Conference Web site: <http://www.scwca.net/>.

March 3-4, 2006: Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association, in Provo, UT

Contact: Penny Bird, e-mail: penny_bird@byu.edu; phone: 801-422-5471. Conference Web site: <http://english.byu.edu/writingcenter/peertutoring.htm>.

March 4, 2006: Northern California Writing Centers Association, in Sacramento, CA

Contact: Susan McCall, e-mail: mccalls@arc.losrios.edu. Conference Web site: <http://ncwca.stanford.edu>.

March 9-11, 2006: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Alliance, OH

Contact: Bill Macauley, e-mail: WMacauley@wooster.edu; phone: 330-263-2372; Rodney Dick, e-mail: dickrf@muc.edu; phone: 330-823-4792. Conference Web site: www.ecwca.org.

April 7-8, 2006: NorthEast Writing Centers Association, in Nashua and Amherst, NH

Contact: Leslie Van Wagner, e-mail: ivanwagner@rivier.edu.

April 8, 2006: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Annapolis, MD

Contact: Chip Crane, e-mail: cecrane@usna.edu; Leigh Ryan, e-mail: lr@umd.edu; and Lisa Zimmerelli, e-mail: lzimmerelli@umuc.edu. Conference Web site: http://www2.mcdaniel.edu/mawca/conf_2006.htm.

October 25-29, 2006: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Louis, MO

Contact: Susan Mueller at smueller@stlscop.edu or Dawn Fels at dfels@earthlink.net. Conference Web site: <http://www.ku.edu/~mwca/>.

2006 Summer Institute

The International Writing Centers Association Summer Institute for Writing Center Directors & Professionals for 2006 will be at Stanford University, July 23-28. Local host and co-chair: Clyde Moneyhun
Co-chair: Michele Eodice

The Institute, in its fourth year, offers an intensive professional development opportunity for new wc directors, seasoned veterans, graduate students planning careers in writing centers—from community college, high school, and university and college writing centers all over the world.

2006 Summer Institute Leaders:

Al DiCiccio (Rivier College)
Lisa Ede (Oregon State University)
Michele Eodice (University of Kansas)
Dawn Mendoza (Simmons College)
Scott Miller (Sonoma State University)
Clyde Moneyhun (Stanford University)
Janet Swenson (Michigan State University)
Sherri Winans (Whatcom Community College)

What you should do if you want to attend:

- Block off those dates (and you may need to arrive on July 22)
- Begin seeking funding and support from your institution. Tuition is \$499. Costs of room, evening meals and transportation are not included: you may need up to \$1000 to cover these expenses. Some scholarships will be made available: details are coming.

Visit the Web site often for updates on registration process: <<http://swc.stanford.edu/iwcasi2006/>>. When registration operations are up on the Web site, we will notify the WCenter listserv. Registration is limited to 45 participants.

Questions should go to: Michele Eodice, University of Kansas <meodice@ku.edu>; Clyde Moneyhun, Stanford University <moneyhun@stanford.edu>.

Call for submissions to *ATEG Journal*

The journal of the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, *ATEG Journal*, needs submissions for its upcoming issue in May, 2006. Current plans call for issues of the journal to be published three times a year, in Fall (September), Winter (January), and Spring (May).

We would like to establish a deadline for submissions at one month before publication: that is, August 1 for the Fall issue, December 1 for the Winter issue, and April 1 for the Spring issue. However, this deadline is flexible and can be relaxed somewhat, depending on the need for materials. Contributors are encouraged to submit

materials as early in the publication cycle as possible to allow adequate time for the refereeing and editing process.

Those who teach graduate courses are especially encouraged to urge graduate students to consider submitting worthwhile course papers on relevant topics for publication in *ATEG Journal*.

Please address any questions to Tim Hadley at Tim.Hadley@ttu.edu

Southeastern Writing Centers Association

February 16-18, 2006
Chapel Hill, NC

“LET’S RESEARCH: Gathering Evidence to Support Writing Center Work”

Keynote speaker: Neal Lerner

For further information, contact Kim Abels, e-mail: kabels@email.unc.edu and Vicki Russell, vgr@duke.edu.
Conference Web site: <<http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio/swca/>>.

Becoming mindful of the absent professor: Teacher/tutor relationships at a small college

When a student doesn't seem to understand the assignment at all, suddenly I feel like I'm being asked to channel the professor.

—Natalie Smith, peer tutor

Although Natalie describes an extreme situation, it brings into sharp focus the specter of the absent professor. At Millsaps College, a small, private liberal arts college in Jackson, Mississippi, our writing center is staffed by and serves undergraduate students who often have difficulty imagining their primary audience: the professor. It is not surprising then that during weekly writing center class meetings, peer tutors often share stories in which moments of tension center around “channeling” professors’ expectations.

Working in the writing center and reflecting collaboratively, we have come to understand that part of our role involves helping student-authors imagine professors across the curriculum as audience; however, we have come to realize that when we take on the role of peer tutor, we are also trying to imagine that same audience but from a different perspective. Generally, we begin conversations with students about their assignment, what they understand the assignment to be asking, and how they have chosen to respond. During the tutorial, students often ask what they should do next, questions that challenge tutors to respond directly, as if speaking for the professor. However, we have come to realize we must resist assuming the authoritative position of the professor or the writer. In each situation we must discover, negotiate, re-define our role—and often help the student do the same. Because face-to-face conversations with students present an immediate challenge, the specter of absent professor often raises questions about authority that remain vague for peer tutor and writer alike.

Although we often discuss writing for different disciplines, peer tutors, like the students they serve, still wonder what individual professors expect from student writing. Trying to imagine our common audience, we revisited an article by Linda Flower and John Hayes, discovered another article by Laurie Delaney, Helen Fuller, Jennifer Kay, and Gratia Murphy, and discussed how teacher/tutor relationships at our small private college differ from those at the large state university. As we reflected on the various situations we encounter in our writing center, we identified four common scenarios in which the absent professor becomes significant and looked for ways to understand and respond effectively to student writers. Four peer tutors—Wes French, Mike Parks, Michael Pickard, and Megan Parks—share what we discovered about how some situations differ significantly from those described by Delaney, et al. In the end, our findings led us to invite previously absent professors into the writing center, with unexpected results.

Like us, Delaney, et al. “discuss . . . the many situations we so often find ourselves in and arrive at some consensus about how we will meet them” (2). Like us, they determined that “the time is long since past when we can ignore the necessary ‘meeting of the minds’ that must occur when collaboration becomes important” (1). However, Delaney, et al. describe some “puzzling, often tricky” situations that do not resonate on our campus.

In the wake of our conversations, we wondered why we might have so little

in common with these authors and realized each writing center, whether at a large state university or small private college, responds to the particular needs of the campus population it serves. In the stories that emerged on our small campus, we identified five distinctive situations in which the absent professor plays a significant role. The first two groups of stories center around professors’ assignments: the first group focuses on students’ creative responses to assignments, and the second, echoing Delaney et al., focuses on ambiguous assignments. The third group of stories focuses on responding to questions about professors’ comments on papers, and the fourth and fifth groups seem to relate directly to the smallness of our campus. With a ratio of about one professor to twelve students, it is common for tutors and students to share classroom experiences; therefore, it is not uncommon for tutors to experience anxiety when they tutor a student writing a paper they have written for a professor and again while filling out the form to be sent to that professor at the end of the tutorial session.

Situation 1: A student brings in a paper that requires vivid description and focused reflection. His paper, although descriptive, has no focus or reflection.

Peer tutor and senior history major Wes French describes how we might address a student’s creative response to an assignment, or “near miss”:

Asking students about their assignments is a common strategy among most of us because the assignment

itself makes the best starting point for talking with students about what they are trying to do in their papers. Ben Rafoth explains that the majority of college writing is based on an assignment, which limits student creativity (76). Yet it seems many students are brought up short because their assumptions seem related to the creative nature of writing and, unknowingly, their ability and willingness, or unwillingness, to assume authority.

Linda Flower and John Hayes explain that because writing itself is a creative process, inexperienced writers are often unable to move beyond the process of discovery, which Donald Murray notes is often the first and only draft of a paper. When this is the case, an inexperienced writer can lose the focus of the assignment, thereby becoming unable to assume authority for all or part of the assignment. Inexperienced writers may also lose focus because they are passionate about or more comfortable with one part of an assignment and thus fail to recognize other, possibly more important, objectives of the assignment. In addition, they may not fully understand the material to be discussed, analyzed or included in their response to an assignment. Also, though not as frequent, I have encountered the occasional student who, looking to apply minimum effort or unwittingly did not allow enough time, chooses to avoid part of an assignment.

Therefore, reading and discussing an assignment with a student allows us to discuss professor expectations and to establish a context for reading a student's paper. Then while reading through the paper, we may more readily address missing or unrelated material.

Situation 2: A student brings in an assignment that includes a list of "suggested questions" that the student "may want to address" and asks:

"Why did the professor include these questions? Must all the questions be answered? Must they be answered in a particular way?"

Like Delaney et al., we noted that as peer tutors we respond to an ambiguous assignment by helping the student frame questions to take to the professor, thus facilitating a conversation between the professor and the student. If, on the other hand, a student feels confident, maybe as a result of directions given in class, that the paper is appropriate even though the assignment may be ambiguous as written, then the student retains full authority. And in our case, the tutor may mention the discussion in the response form sent to the student's professor.

Situation 3: A student brings in a rough draft with the professor's comments. The student wants only to know how to fix the paper according to each comment. Whose objectives should prevail? The student's, to fix the paper at hand? Or the tutor's, to discuss the comments in relation to the student's writing generally?

Peer tutor and junior classics major Mike Parks shares how peer tutors negotiate students' objective of improving a grade and our objective of improving student writing:

Because students often fixate on grades, and not on their writing process, we find they either want to rationalize what they have already written, or they want to know what specifically to do to improve their grade. John Trimbur explains that because "grades" are "the central measure of success in higher education" (117), tutorials often become more "conventional," more focused on the grade the paper at hand might receive, not the process of writing it or the student's abilities as a writer (118). So when a student came to the writing center with a first draft of a paper that included his professor's comments, I could understand why

he wanted to address each comment and fix that spot, to fulfill the professor's expectations, rather than discuss them in relation to his paper overall.

However, in class we discussed how professor comments may also be used to help an individual become a better writer in general. Erin, a peer tutor and senior art history major, says she includes an explanation about the broader importance of professor comments. She tries to steer the student's attention from the "one-time quick-fix mentality" by talking with the student about his or her writing process and how the professor's comments might be used to "strengthen the student's writing overall, and not just in this one instance." So although a student may find a way to fix the paper at hand, that student may also leave the writing center with a fuller understanding of the larger conversation taking place between author and audience—and with a desire to return to the writing center.

Situation 4: A student comes in with a paper for a professor the tutor has had a class with before. Therefore, the tutor knows the professor's pet peeves and expectations for the assignment.

Peer tutor and senior English major Michael Pickard describes how he negotiated sharing what he knows as a student about a professor while trying to remain responsive and non-directive as a peer tutor:

From the first, Scott wanted to focus on organization. He often had problems, he told me, remaining on track. When I asked him about the assignment, he responded by discussing *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* rather than his paper. His response and his paper confirmed Scott's self-analysis. To be honest, I was nearly overwhelmed. As I read, I had to work to remember my

responsibility as a tutor to help the writer, not fix the paper—to remain within the bounds of the Honor Code. I began to wonder if I might mishandle Scott’s tutorial. No non-directive questions came to mind; I know this assignment and Scott’s professor. I wanted to tell Scott what to write but refrained; however, I did suggest that he choose a few moments from Joyce’s text that seemed to support his thesis and discuss each moment in a single paragraph. I asked a few questions about specific points in his paper but received unfocused comments in return. I had a frightening feeling that success would elude me, us. Then, as I began to repeat a few of the points I made earlier, about adding moments from the book, Scott became more animated, more focused. As he left, he thanked me twice for my “good help.” In this session I became acutely aware both of my knowledge of the text and Scott’s professor, and of my role as tutor, which raised questions for me about a tutor’s relationship to the student’s professor. As a senior English major, I know what English professors expect; Scott, a business major, does not; and because I had taken the course on Joyce with Scott’s professor, I know what he expects. Although the relationship between student and tutor was unbalanced, as a peer tutor I felt that I had to abstain from being directive, to relinquish the authority that comes from knowledge of a text, a discipline, and a professor’s expectations.

In “Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring,” however, Peter Carino explains that “none of us likes to feel less empowered than another in interpersonal relations” (97) and suggests that there are instances when a directive approach to peer tutoring simply works where non-directive methods do not (110).

Therefore, because I was able to offer organizational information to Scott, I was in a position to take a more directive approach. And because I did offer that information, rather than just ask questions, Scott seemed to be able to imagine—and thus to write for—his new audience.

Situation 5: A student, and classmate, of the tutor comes in with a paper they have both been assigned to write. Throughout the session, the tutor and student find the session helpful, collaborative. However, when the session ends, the tutor must fill out the form to the professor: How will he react? Will he mention it in class?

Peer tutor and senior sociology major Megan Parks shares how knowing a professor complicates filling out the form at the end of the tutorial:

When I first began tutoring, I quickly jotted down non-evaluative comments, like we were taught, about what we talked about during the tutoring session, placed the form in the tray as usual, and went about my business, never really imagining a professor reading those comments. One day, after a semester of tutoring, I ran into a professor I had had for a class, and while we were chatting, he casually mentioned that he had not realized that I work in the writing center. This struck me as odd until I remembered I had tutored one of his students the previous week, and I began to wonder what he thought about my interaction with his student, whether or not my comments conveyed helpful information about the session, whether or not he would continue to recommend students to the writing center. That moment, I began reviewing my comments carefully, trying to imagine the professor’s reaction. I became more aware of the boundary between my role as tutor and the professor’s role as teacher, more aware of the reasons why my comments must be descriptive, not

evaluative, and why I must remain responsive to the student-author during the tutorial session. In that moment, I realized that professors are never really absent: student and tutor work on a paper for the professor, the student turns in the paper to the professor, and the tutor writes comments to the professor. Thus filling out a comment slip offers an important opportunity to reflect on the goals of the session, to reflect on my role as a tutor, and to communicate what we do in the writing center.

Following our discussions about the absent professor, as writing center coordinator I began to invite one professor from each of the three divisions each semester to our writing center meetings, which had an effect we did not imagine. In these conversations, professors share how they teach and assess writing; tutors share how they talk with students about their writing; and faculty and tutors ask each other questions. And in response, tutors and faculty alike have expressed that they enjoy the conversations and that they are more comfortable and confident talking about writing, about teaching writing, and tutoring writers. After visiting our class this past fall, the chair of the Math Department said, “What was so neat to me was that while I was talking with the tutors about what I look for in student writing, I began to relate writing to problem solving, and to better understand the writing process. I found that I could explain to students why they need to show their work, not just come up with a correct answer.” And a professor of biology sent me a thank-you e-mail, saying that discussing writing with the tutors helped her more “clearly imagine the audience for her writing assignments,” which she discovered results in better assignments and, in the end, better student writing.

By inviting the absent professor into the writing center conversation, we have been able to help faculty feel

more comfortable about what we do in the writing center and about teaching writing, and peer tutors have become more comfortable negotiating professors' expectations in their absence.

*Kathi Griffin, Wes French, Mike Parks,
Michael Pickard, Megan Parks
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Jackson, MS*

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Celebrating International Writing Centers Week

The first annual International Writing Centers Week will take place Feb. 12-18, 2006. The planning committee for this event developed a logo that is available for use (at writingcenters.org). Merchandise with this logo is available through cafePress.com and may be purchased via the link from writingcenters.org.

Share your ideas for IWCW 2006 at <http://writingcenters.org/board>. Click on the "IWCW 2006 ideas & plans" link. In order to share your ideas and plans, you will need to have an account on the IWCA Discussion Forums. You can get an account by clicking on the "Register" link in the top right of the page (right next to the Login/Home links).

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