

THE WRITING AB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 21, Number 1 Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing

September, 1996

FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome back—to a new academic year and a new volume of the newsletter.

As we all slip back into our work mode, this issue of the newsletter offers you a range of voices and moods to remind you how diverse our concerns are. Jeanne Simpson (always a much appreciated voice on WCenter) starts us off with a warning about commercial enterprises interested in becoming our competition. Then, to lighten things a bit, Todd McCann shares with us the humorous skits he uses for orientation sessions to dispel myths about our work. Equally useful for publicizing our labs and centers is Jim Bell's lengthy list of promotional ideas.

And there's a book review of the first book published by the NWCA Press, Michael A. Pemberton's thought-provoking column on ethical questions, Liz Rohan's account of revisiting her undergraduate days, and news of conferences, calls for papers, and job listings. Surely, there's something for everyone here, and if not, let us know what you would like to read in *your* newsletter in the coming months.

Again, welcome back, and I wish us all (including the students who enter our doors) a great year!

• Muriel Harris, editor

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Slippery Sylvans sliding sleekly into the writing center— Or preparing for professional competition

Recently, I read in the February 1996 issue of the American Federation of Teachers publication, *On Campus*, an article detailing how Sylvan Learning Systems, a private company that offers k-12 level tutoring nationwide, has been contracted to teach remedial math courses at Howard County Community College in Maryland. Sylvan is being offered the opportunity to demonstrate its performance against regular sections of the math course, with the same pre- and post-tests offered to both groups of students. The article indicates that Sylvan is very interested in the market potential of higher education, especially at institutions that offer a lot of remedial courses. Let me quote from the last paragraph:

She [a Howard C.C. official] sees the experiment with Sylvan as an attempt to get more students on track to doing college-level work as fast as possible, especially as various states move to limit the

amount of money they're willing to spend on remedial education. [p.3]

Now what has this to do with writing centers?

Sylvan represents one aspect of a growing trend of privatized, contracted education. The effort of the Whittle company in Tennessee to develop commercial school systems is another. Already, universities and colleges are looking at ways to contract out services they can no longer afford to de-

velop and support internally. Some, for example, are looking at using commercial access to the Internet, because the cost of sustaining up-to-date equipment is beyond their reach—especially now that every institution I know of is struggling with lean, even malnourished budgets. Contracted food service has been around for years.

Sooner or later, someone in a college or university administration is likely to think, "what else can we contract out more cheaply?" Learning assistance programs, including writing centers, are very likely to find themselves in these crosshairs. Writing centers as we know them are about to have, may already have, competition. Is this a danger? Is it something we should worry about? I think it is. One obvious concern is that our flexibility, the knowledge and skills for adapting pedagogy to individual need that we have developed in writing centers might be lost. The system described as being Sylvan's is one of "mastery learning." While I don't object to that, I do object to any one-size-fits-all approach to pedagogy. Writing centers represent the antithesis of that kind of thinking. We know how important it is to be more adaptable. But we have not done a good job of convincing institutions of that reality. We have not yet succeeded in changing the mindset that now presents us with a whole new consideration.

Even more seriously, however, Sylvan represents a set of corporate values that we need to study carefully and not reject simply because they *are* corporate. Recently, the president of Danville Area Community College (DACC) visited Eastern and talked at length about how his school is re-examining their market niche closely, that they are thinking about delivery modes that do not include credit hours, for there is so much corporate education going on that is not degree-related but is job-related. It is competition for colleges. He says they have to be customer-oriented and deliver what people

want or, like many British community colleges, they will cease to exist. One of the things he talked about was Edward Deming's ideas about Total Quality Management/Continuous Quality Improvement (TQM/CQM) as principles that are more and more applicable to higher education. I agree. We are already doing TQM in higher education, though not as methodically as we will be.

Writing centers are going to have to get into this kind of approach, this kind of thinking, and fast, because we offer support services that can be contracted or farmed out. We cannot think in terms of traditional academic structures or it will be fatal conservatism for many writing centers, especially those in places like DACC. For writing centers at research institutions, maybe not. But most centers are not at such schools.

A central idea that writing centers need to comprehend more profoundly than they do even yet, even with writing across the curriculum, is their complete dependence on the curriculum. The tendency is to think outside the curriculum, to think only of teaching writing and to feel somewhat proprietary about doing that. But the institutional reality is that writing centers depend for their existence on their ability to support the curriculum being offered, including non-credit and unconventional ones.

We need to be tuned to shifts in the curricular wind, including the sort of thing this community college president is talking about. When he describes offering instruction, on site, to corporate and governmental clients who are not interested in the usual course-for-credit structure, but who are really interested in results, that is writing center talk, and we should be on the front lines of offering such programs. We won't be unless we are prepared to meet the particular demands involved.

And one of those demands will be

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Editor: Muriel Harris; Asst. to the Editor: Mary Jo Turley, English Dept., Purdue University, 1356 Heavilon, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356 (317)494-7268. e-mail: harrism@cc.purdue.edu turleymj@cc.purdue.edu

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Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is ten to fifteen double-spaced typed pages, three to five pages for reviews, and four pages for the Tutors' Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. If possible, please send a 3 and 1/4 in. disk with the file, along with the hard copy. Please enclose a self-addressed envelope with return postage not pasted to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 45 days prior to the month of issue (e.g. August 15 for October issue).

Please send articles, reviews, announcements, comments, queries, and yearly subscription payments to the editor.

demonstrable professionalism on a level we have not yet achieved. Writing centers still want acceptance as fully integrated parts of the institutional community, wanting tenure/faculty status, etc. And yet still we cling to the idea of separation and so-called marginality. We need to get over the idea that we are somehow oppressed or that being “marginalized” automatically confers virtue. So many institutions of higher education support writing centers—look at the range represented on WCenter. And it is international, not just a U.S. pattern. Those institutions are paying for salaries, space, heat, electricity, equipment, insurance, etc. when they say, yes, go do a writing center. Such support is never a minor commitment. Often these writing centers are expected to service the entire institution.

Unfortunately, too often, writing center personnel are unaware of the costs involved in supporting a writing center. We focus on disciplinary content, on writing, writing theory, writing pedagogy. Although these are important, focusing only on them and keeping this traditional mindset automatically channels one into the sidelines, because a writing center is not a department in the traditional sense of the term. As long as we think in these terms, we are going to perceive ourselves as misfits because we are, in that arrangement.

A writing center doesn't have to develop its own individuality. It is already a unique function. The details may differ from institution to institution, but writing centers exist in every case because some function needed to be fulfilled. What a center needs is to develop integrity and professionalism. The enemy is complacency and inattention. It isn't a person or an idea. It is in ourselves. We recklessly, foolishly, spend our energies on whining, introspection, self-pity, and our own professional struggles within traditional academic structures, wanting the traditional, when all the evidence

around us suggests that it is worse than a waste of time—it may be fatal. Writing centers have been very successful at developing alternative pedagogy, at providing research and theory bases for composition studies. They have been equally successful at adapting computer technology such as on-line centers and MOOs to the needs of students.

The problem now is to achieve similar success in other facets of writing center operations. I offer three possibilities for doing this, though I know there are plenty more. First, while I certainly would insist that any writing center preparation has to begin with a sound knowledge of composition theory and practice, I believe we must begin to do more to prepare ourselves appropriately. A headline story in one of the February 1996 issues of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* was about a doctoral program that was actually preparing candidates to do the teaching they will be required to do in the academic profession, as well as research and scholarship. Even though I despair that it is so novel that it merits a front page photo story, I think this is a turn in the right direction.

I propose that we go in this same direction and prepare future writing center directors for some of the administrative work that comes with this assignment. So, one step I would propose is for writing center personnel at doctoral institutions to push to get broader-based preparation worked into these graduate programs. I think it needs to be done for any graduate program, but certainly any that produce future writing center directors. We who started writing centers ten, fifteen, or twenty years ago can testify to how much time we lost learning the most basic administrative stuff. We still spend time teaching this to each other in an ad hoc way. That's fine, but it should no longer be the only means to get this kind of preparation. It doesn't produce credibility with any of our

constituents for us to be ignorant of budget processes, the most basic principles of personnel management, institutional structures and dynamics, proposal writing, development of policies and procedures.

We need to be honest with ourselves that writing center work is more than teaching, it is also administration. If we believe in formal credentials for the job, then we should work to make them credible and complete as well. It wouldn't take much, I suspect, to find courses already available to provide this kind of preparation in doctoral programs. It might require our going, hats in hand, to departments of education or business. But the results, I submit, would be worth that effort.

Second, we need to attend to doing a far better job of documenting the activities of the people who tutor in our writing centers. We need to regard them, to use a word recently suggested by Katie Fischer on WCenter, as our associates. Whether they are receiving paychecks or credit hours or tuition waivers or some combination of these, they are, ultimately, employees of our writing centers. We tend to regard them as a sort of combination of employee, student, friend, sibling, child. While that easy, informal and comfortable approach feels good and makes for strong camaraderie, it often leads us to forget some important things. Remember, these tutors are the core of writing center services. We are what they do. Further, they are the pool from which a great many future writing center directors will come. Informality and inattention to documenting what they do and how successfully they do it will not serve them well, and it won't serve our profession well.

Those Sylvan tutors are evaluated on results, hard numbers: how many people do they get to an acceptable level of mastery within X amount of time? It is a crude and ruthless measure of quality, one I imagine any of us would resist. The best way to resist

getting this kind of evaluative standard imposed on us is to establish our own. We must do this quickly, my friends. We need to start writing job descriptions for our tutors as well as for ourselves. We need to set up systems of evaluating their performance (and our own) against those descriptions, systems that include a predictable schedule and that include clear feedback about strengths and weaknesses and plans for improvement. We need to establish methods and materials by which we will evaluate. And then we need to do the evaluating and live by the results.

On a less global note, I would point out an additional advantage to addressing the issue of evaluating our tutors, ourselves, and our services. How often, on WCenter, I read about problems that are really ordinary personnel problems that occur in any setting, not just writing centers. But writing center directors, used to being helpers and problem solvers, don't always know how to proceed, often are unaware of larger institutional and legal implications. The responses are stunningly naive at times. We need to be more careful about protecting ourselves and our centers, while at the same time modeling professional activities for tutors and future directors.

My third recommendation for improving our professionalism is a big one: it is time to develop a system of accreditation for writing centers. Even in the wonderful diversity of contexts where writing centers exist, we can find commonalities. The existence of our professional literature and organizations attests to that. More specifically, we can find commonality of excellence.

What would a set of accreditation standards for writing centers look like? Well, I can think of several, offered as a starting point for discussion. An accredited writing center would demon-

strate a good fit between its structures and mission and those of the institution. The structures of an urban, commuter school's writing center would and should differ from those of a more rural institution such as mine with a large population of resident students. A community college is not like a state land grant university, and neither is like a high school. They shouldn't have interchangeable writing centers.

An accredited writing center would demonstrate a consistent and coherent system of assessing itself and its services. We need to be able to prove that we are doing what we say we are doing. There are in the writing center community now centers developing and implementing good assessment programs without, I think, realizing how desperately the rest need these ideas and methods to be shared. An accreditation system would provide the mechanism for doing that. Even better, linking assessment and accreditation would provide a long-needed impetus for better data-gathering in writing centers. Our hit-and-miss approach to data gathering, our struggles to determine what is usable data and what isn't, have not served us well in making our cases to administrators. We need to develop a more consistent approach to data, to measurement units and concepts.

An accredited writing center would have a strong tutor-training program. I don't think I need to thump this tub very hard—this principle has been part of our work for a long time. But it is not a principle widely recognized outside of the writing center community. I frequently encounter so-called tutoring programs in which there is no training at all, only assigning tutors to students with a fond hope that something nice will result. If we can provide leadership in the accreditation of learning assistance programs, one of the results should be the wider acceptance of this basic, profoundly important principle.

An accredited writing center would have clearly articulated policies and procedures, consonant with those of the institution. Again, one of our failures has been that we have not thought about these issues, have not discussed them thoroughly or articulated any principles related to them. The result has been a dangerously improvisational approach, one which has the unfortunate effect of emphasizing that amateurism that Steve North has referred to in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*.

Accreditation for writing centers will require some organizing—we have the mechanism for that through the National Writing Centers Association and our regionals. It will require some rigorous efforts in individual writing centers. Only you can do that. But I see accreditation as desirable for making writing centers intrinsically better as well as for strengthening their position in institutional politics and struggles for funding. And accreditation, developed by writing center professionals for writing center professionals, is in all ways preferable to waiting for standards to be imposed upon us arbitrarily by outside entities.

If you believe you make a difference in students' lives and contribute to preparing them for their futures, then you must attend first to your own house and design the structure you want. If you are not strong within, if your inner lights do not burn brightly, then you cannot help those students nor support the faculty who also need your help. The call for writing centers exists because there is a need. Those issuing the call do not necessarily know what it takes to create a solid, credible writing center. For this reason the ones with the most clearly defined principles, goals, and procedures are the ones that will survive or be adopted. Meet Sylvan head on . . . do not let them slink, slide, or slip into the academic community. Take the initiative now!

Using skits to get the word out

Many of us in the writing center business spend considerable amounts of our time getting the word out. We get the word out to students, letting them know, at the very least, that we exist. We get the word out to faculty, administrators, and staff, letting them know that, no, we *really don't* write students' papers for them. We visit classes and department meetings, send out memos and newsletters, post flyers and clever ads. Still, sometimes we're left wondering, "Is anyone listening?"

Visiting classes and meetings, creating newsletters, flyers, and ads—all of the "old standards"—remain important ways to get the word out, regardless of their sometimes-felt ineffectiveness. Here at Bay College, I have been doing those things since our writing center was born in the fall of 1993. However, this year I wanted to come up with something a bit livelier, something people would enjoy and remember.

After reading Michael Pemberton's series on writing center ethics in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, I got the idea to use some of the common myths about writing centers, or some of "The Top Ten Reasons Why Writing Centers Are Unethical" he presented in his articles, for a series of humorous skits.

I presented these skits, one-minute exaggerations of writing center myths, at a recent faculty in-service. Instead of having well-rehearsed actors deliver the lines, though, I asked for volunteers from the audience to play the various roles. Five different sets of players read from five prepared scripts, and after each skit was over, I stepped in and told the *Truth* about our writing center.

The response to the skits was overwhelmingly positive. One instructor even asked if I'd present the skits to her math class. Another told me he fi-

nally understood what went on in the Writing Center, even though the informational memos and flyers I had been sending him for the past two years contained essentially the same information presented in the skits.

Of course, the scenes presented here reflect some local inside humor, which worked well at our small community college in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Whether they would play in Toledo is another question.

Scenario 1: Writing Center Tutors Write Students' Papers for Them

Janet, a Writing Center tutor, and Michelle, a student writing a research paper for a political science class, are sitting together in the Writing Center discussing Michelle's paper.

M: I just can't think of anything to write.

J: (Grabs the pencil from Michele's hand.) Well, how about starting off with, "The Reagan administration is solely responsible for America's huge international debt"?

M: But I don't know that. How can I . . .

J: That's okay, take my word. Reagan messed us up bad. You want your first sentence to really grab the reader and shake him.

M: But I liked Reagan; I voted for him twice.

J: (Continues writing.) Don't let it bother you. Let's see, how about, "Reagan ignored the rising debt while he increased unnecessary defense spending." Sound good?

M: But my instructor wanted us to write our own thoughts and back them up with outside sources.

J: Hey, take it from me. I know

your instructor. She's a real left-winger—Birkenstock sandals, public radio, Green Peace—the whole bit. You better believe she hated Reagan. You write a paper praising him and she'll drill you.

M: Really?

J: Absolutely.

M: Oh.

J: (Continues writing, then pauses.) Would you ever use the word "sinister" in your writing?

M: I doubt it.

J: How about "diabolic"?

M: No.

J: (Continues writing.) We'll stick with plain old "evil" then.

M: I can't get in trouble for this, can I?

J: Just deny everything, and I'll do the same. Remember, she has to prove any wrong doing beyond a reasonable doubt.

M: Well, do you mind if I read it before I turn it in?

J: Believe me, not necessary. We do quality work here.

Scenario 2: The Writing Center Is a Grammar Fix-it Shop

Barb, a first-year composition student, drops by the Writing Center one morning. Sally, a Writing Center tutor, greets her.

S: Good morning, can I help you?

B: Yeah, my Rhet. and Comp. teacher says I need to smooth out my punctuation and grammar. (Hands Sally a crumpled paper.)

S: Oh, yes, I see what you mean. Looks a little rough.

B: I'm in kind of a hurry.

S: No problem. We offer one-hour service. (Hands Barb a

form.) If you'll just fill this out, I can have it ready for you by, say, eleven-thirty?

B: Great. Can you throw in some extra commas while you're at it?

S: Sure. How about semicolons? You like semicolons?

B: Are they extra?

S: The first two are always on the house here at the Writing Center.

B: Okay, I'll take two.

S: (Tears receipt from form and hands it to Barb.) See you in an hour.

(ONE HOUR LATER)

B: Hi, I'm here to pick up my paper. (Hands Sally receipt.)

S: Oh, yes, the one classifying types of TV villains. Very informative. (Hands Barb a smooth paper.) Here you go, all cleaned up.

B: Wow, looks great. (Sniffs it.) Smells good, too.

S: Thank you. We take pride in our work, and we lightly scent each paper with just a hint of lemon or cinnamon.

B: Say, I'm transferring to Northern next semester. Can I fax you?

S: Absolutely. Same-day service guaranteed.

B: Great.

Scenario 3: The Writing Center Is Only for Terrible Writers

Shannon, a nursing student, comes to the Writing Center to make an appointment. She is greeted by Bev, a Writing Center tutor.

B: Hi, can I help you?

S: Yes, I'd like to make an appointment to see someone about my research paper.

B: Research paper?

S: Yes, for Abnormal Psychology.

B: But isn't that a 200-level class?

S: Yes.

B: Does anyone know you're here?

S: Pardon me?

B: Did anyone see you come in?

S: I don't know. Is there a problem?

B: People might talk.

S: I'm afraid I don't understand.

B: They might think you're one of them, if you know what I mean.

S: No, I don't.

B: Let me just say that you're not the type we usually see in here.

S: What?

B: I mean, you seem to speak in complete sentences . . . and you're not even drooling or anything.

S: I just wanted some comments on how my paper's organized.

B: Sorry, we only work with the rhetorically challenged.

S: The rhetorically challenged?

B: Yes, the writing impaired.

S: I really just need to talk to someone about my paper.

B: So sorry. You should have been warned before you came in. Now we have to worry about getting you out of here with your reputation intact.

S: I can't just leave?

B: And risk having one of your instructors see you? I wouldn't chance it. Here, try this. (Places grocery bag over Shannon's head.) Now run for it!

Scenario 4: The Writing Center Undermines Instructors' Objectives

Bonnie, a first-year composition student, is being tutored by Jennifer.

B: I'm a good writer. My instructor's an idiot—that's the problem.

J: Who's your instructor?

B: Lenny . . . LeRoy . . . Loren . . . Oh, I can't remember. All I know is that he's a jerk.

J: Larry? Larry Lawful?

B: That's the one. You know him?

J: I'll say. He gave me a C in Research Writing.

B: So you know how he is. He

won't let me write about *Melrose Place* or getting a tan or my boyfriend's snowmobile or anything interesting.

J: And he expects you to write a million pages a week, right?

B: Yeah.

J: You're right. He is a jerk.

B: Thank you.

J: (Pauses.) You know, I think we can change him if you're willing to help.

B: Change him?

J: You'd be doing other students a favor.

B: I don't want to tick him off.

J: Relax. We tell every one of his students we see the same thing. We've got a regular campaign going here. He's got to be stopped. You know that.

B: What do I have to do?

J: Give him a heavy dose of passive-aggressive behavior.

B: Huh?

J: Show up late for every class. Pretend you're sleeping when he's talking. When he asks you any question, just shrug your shoulders. Chip away at him little by little. Before you know it, he'll just be a babbling recluse adrift on his sailboat.

B: I don't know. He might give me a bad grade.

J: Bonnie, we've got 60% of your class on our side. We need you to be strong.

B: Okay. If it's for the good of humanity, count me in.

Scenario 5: Writing Center Tutors Are Incompetent

Jane, a peer tutor, is helping Wendy with a writing assignment

W: I'm pretty comfortable with my content, but I know I'm terrible with punctuation.

J: Oh, don't bother. That stuff doesn't matter anyway.

W: Not according to my instructor.

J: We here at the Writing Center think punctuation is for anal retentives—small-minded

people who get hung up on details.

- W: But my instructor said my punctuation was so bad it interfered with her understanding my meaning.
- J: She just can't see the forest for the trees.
- W: What?
- J: She can't see past those superficial little marks to recognize your grand thoughts.
- W: Can't you just tell me when to use a comma?
- J: Umm, let's see. I once heard, "When in doubt, leave it out." How's that?
- W: But I'm always in doubt.
- J: Then always leave them out.
- W: All of them?
- J: Hey, that's the rule, like it or not.
- W: What about semicolons?
- J: Umm, they're no longer used. Not since '92 when Clinton was elected.
- W: Ever?
- J: That's right.
- W: Colons?
- J: Gone.
- W: Apostrophes?
- J: After words ending with an "s" . . . I think. Or maybe it's before the "s."
- W: Maybe we should look it up in a handbook or something.
- J: Oh, God, those things are so confusing. They're full of outdated gibberish.

Todd McCann
Bay de Noc Community College
Escanaba, MI

Call for Papers

The CCCC Research Network Forum (RNF) seeks presenters at the meeting of the RNF in 1997 in Phoenix, Arizona. The Research Network Forum provides an opportunity for published researchers, new researchers, and graduate students to discuss their current research projects and to receive response. Participants include editors of printed and electronic journals of composition/rhetoric, literary criticism, and electronic publishing (in the last session, editors [as mentors] will meet 3:00-4. Proposals are due Jan. 1, 1997. Submitters who make this second deadline will only get the invitation from RNF (not from CCCC), and their names will be published in the NCTE Addendum and, of course, in the RNF Program. Presenters at RNF may also present on the regular program.

To get a copy of the proposal form, mail, fax, or e-mail Kim Brian Lovejoy, Work-in-Progress Coordinator, Dept. of English, Indiana-Purdue University at Indianapolis 425 University Boulevard, Indianapolis, IN 46202 Fax: 317-274-2347; e-mail: idri100@indycms.iupui.edu

Website Works in Progress Coordinator: Jim Dubinsky (Miami U, Oxford, OH) at dubinsky@miami.muohio.edu Inquiries also: Ollie Oviedo, Chair, 1997 Research Network Forum/CCCC, Station 19, Eastern New Mexico University, Portales, NM 88130; Tel: (505) 562-2742; FAX: 505-562-2362; E-mail: oviedoo@email.enmu.edu

Job Opening

Dodge City Community College is seeking a Writing Center Director able to teach Composition, Literature, operate a Writing Center and perform other duties as assigned. This is a one-year, full-time, faculty position. Masters Degree required. Previous community college teaching experience preferred. Application review will be on-going and continue until the position is filled. Application materials available on request. Application package requires letter of application, completed application form, resume, transcripts, and the names and addresses of at least four professional references. Only complete application packages will be considered. Mrs. Carol Sheurman, Director of Personnel, Dodge City Community College, 1501 North 14th Avenue, Dodge City, Kansas 67801 (316-225-1321, ext. 249). AA/EEO/MFD

Preliminary Plans for East Central Writing Centers Association's 1997 Conference

Details for the East Central Writing Centers Association's 1997 conference, to be held on April 18-19, 1997, in Pittsburgh, PA, will be included in a forthcoming issue of the newsletter. For now, if you have questions or want further information, contact Margaret Marshall: phone: 412-624-6555; e-mail: marshall+@pitt.edu

Corrected Dates for the Peer Tutoring in Writing Thirteenth Annual Conference

The correct dates for the Thirteenth Annual Peer Tutoring in Writing Conference are Friday to Sunday, October 25-27, 1996, to be held at the Embassy Suites Hotel, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The conference begins at 5 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 25 and concludes by 1 p.m. on Sunday, Oct. 27. For information, please contact Kevin Davis, East Central University, Ada, Oklahoma 74820; phone 405-332-8000; fax: 405-332-6363; e-mail kdavis@mailclerk.ecok.edu

Northern California Writing Centers Association

Call for Papers/Presentations
February 28, 1997
Hayward, CA
"Facing New Challenges in the Center"

Possible topics include collaboration, new/creative uses of tutors, technology, ESL strategies, non-traditional students, alliances across campus and community, writing across disciplines, tutor training, teachers, tutors' roundtables, coordinators' roundtable, writing center marketing. Send abstracts by Dec. 6, 1996, to Kimberly Pratt, Division of Language Arts, Chabot College, 25555 Hesperian Blvd., Hayward, CA 94545. Phone: 510-786-6950.

Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals
November 2, 1996
Portland, Oregon
"Writing across the Center: Deconstructing/Resituating Roles and Expectations"

Individual or group proposals are invited. For a proposal form or additional information, contact Karen Vaught-Alexander, University of Portland Writing Center, ATTN: 1996 PCWCAC, 5000 N. Willamette Blvd., Portland, OR 97203-5798. Phone: 503-283-7461; e-mail: karenva@uofport.edu. Deadline: proposals must be received by Sept. 24, 1996.

Learning Assistance Association of New England

Oct. 25, 1996
Burlington, MA
"Emerging Realities in Developmental Education, 1996"
Keynote speaker: Jack Levin

For more information, contact Brinda Van, Northeast Correctional Institute, 251 Middle Turnpike, Storrs, CT 06268. Phone: 860-487-4412.

New England Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals
March 1, 1997
Providence, Rhode Island
"Politics, Ethics, and Survival"
Keynote speaker: John Trimbur

Proposals are invited from teachers, directors, peer and professional tutors from high school and college writing centers. Proposals must include the following information: proposer's name and educational institution; names, addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses of presenters; type of session (interactive presentation, workshop, panel discussion); intended audience (directors, peer or professional tutors, general); audio-visual needs; one-page description of the presentation; and a 75-word abstract which will be published in the conference program. All proposals must be received by Monday, October 21, 1996. Decisions will be announced in early December. Send four copies to Meg Carroll; Writing Center; Rhode Island College; Providence, RI 02908 (mcarroll@grog.ric.edu)

TUTORS' COLUMN

Look homeward, tutor

You can't go home again. That's what Thomas Wolfe once wrote. This I remember from my patchy, checkered education. At the same time, I believe that despite his theory, Wolfe tried it. Going home. It's very tempting—particularly since there's so many skeletons tucked in baggage in that place.

I went home this past Fall, not to my actual home town, but rather my academic home, where it all started. Ann Arbor. Home also to the Wolverines and the University of Michigan—the locale of my undergraduate education. Sure, I had visited the place since I left six years ago. But this time I was returning for a specific purpose. As technology coordinator for DePaul's writing center—part of my job as a DePaul writing center graduate assistant—I arranged to talk to the organizers of the University of Michigan's writing center to get some ideas for DePaul's.

I was interested specifically in Michigan's newly established online writing center and talked to its creator. She explained how Michigan's OWL caters to students who live off-campus and can't get to the writing center, or students who are reluctant to meet with a tutor one-on-one because they are shy or especially sensitive to criticism. Although Michigan's students are encouraged to send their papers to the OWL, tutors welcome them to come in and meet with a tutor face-to-face. On the whole, tutors responding to students' writing online must be constructive, upbeat, and kind, reflecting the tone of a one-on-one tutorial.

To gain a sense for the scholarship among Michigan's tutors, the professor who teaches the class training Michigan's writing center tutors invited me to sit in on it. The students in this class were undergraduates chosen to be trained as tutors because of their excellent writing skills. The day I sat in on their course they were "workshopping"

their final papers, which were actually quite polished. On the whole, the tutors seemed confident in themselves, supportive of one another, enthusiastic about tutoring and reminded me very much of the tutors I work with at DePaul. Funny. Going home felt like my current home: DePaul.

After my journey through online tutoring and meeting people who reminded me of people I knew from home, while "home," I was rather pen-sive, and headed to a familiar spot—Michigan's graduate library carrels, the birthplace of the majority of my papers when I first arrived at Michigan. While an undergraduate, I wasn't very technologically coordinated. In other words, I composed my papers on notebook paper while sitting in a carrel—a small room with a chair and table—and then typed them up on a typewriter, unspellchecked.

I found a carrel with a window seat in this old composing place. Peering out the window, it didn't surprise me that the weather hadn't changed much in seven years: gray and "Novembery." Paper writing days, in my memory, were for the most part gray. The sun, like my prose (and good grades) struggled to penetrate, managing to cast a dim shadow once in a while.

I noticed that the graffiti, written in the grooves of the heating vent, hadn't changed much either. In my solo paper writing moments the anonymous graffiti writers—others battling gray and paper writing—had been my only collaborators in tackling academia. In each groove there is only about an inch space for text, some of it more than twenty years old. There are several genres of graffiti in these grooves. The homesickness genre: "Traverse City, Michigan," "Toledo, Ohio"; the sportsperson's genre: "Illinois 17, Michigan 10," "Michigan 27, Iowa 3"; the genre for the lovelorn: "Love stinks," "I love Brian"; and lastly, the

genre for the weather watchers: "1/12/84 It's snowy," "5/10/91 Sunny and 80."

As I sat watching the gray defeat the sun, awfully glad I did not have a paper due, I thought about the past, the profile of an OWL client and the tutors in Michigan's writing center class who reminded me of the tutors I know at DePaul, and perhaps of myself—now. I thought about my undergraduate papers in the stacks, my graffiti writing collaborators and the weather that was seemingly the same because after all I was home. While going back to that composing place as a tutor—a writer seemingly in control—was a sort of triumph, it was a melancholy triumph coupled with memories of times when I wasn't so in control. Unlike the Michigan undergraduates whom I had just met, when a technically uncoordinated undergraduate, I was not a very confident writer of academic prose.

In reality, when a freshman at Michigan, I was especially sensitive to the critical comments I got on my papers and was not very good at interpreting them. They seemed impersonal to me, cold, compared to those I was used to receiving on my papers in high school. Composing alone in the stacks, in need of kind words on my papers, I got what I believed to be rather harsh words in the margins of my papers in their stead. Although it made its way slowly back by the time I was a senior, I lost a lot of confidence in myself when learning and, I thought, failing to write academically. That was me. *That* was home.

I realize now that I was overly intimidated by my professors and would have benefited from a writing center tutor. However, I never sought out the writing center. I hadn't known it existed. And even if I had, I probably wouldn't have gone because when my poor grades rolled in, it was too gray for me to believe that somewhere on campus the sun was particularly shining on paper writ-

ers, that indeed—beyond my vent writing collaborators—I was not alone in pursuit of support in the wake of criticism. In search of something more than As, in search of kind words, I could not imagine there were those especially in business to give them.

Yes, my debut with academia was rather stormy. However, the experience has helped me feel empathy toward student writers who are less prepared to write academically, and thus more hypothetically vulnerable to criticism, than I had been. Although it was hard then, it meant something. Pondering my role now, as a writing tutor, administerer of kind words to composers, and also one who understands why it is important to give them—having not gotten them during a gray season while an undergraduate, I felt that indeed, six years later, the weather had changed—at least inside of me.

No, I haven't forgotten and I won't forget. That's probably why Wolfe warned us not to go there—home. Why bother? You never *really* do leave the place. "11/27/95," I wrote in a blank groove in the heating vent, in that old composing space full of memories, but without a spell check, "I'm still not over it." A need to write. A need for kind words. The universal weather report.

Liz Rohan
DePaul University
Chicago, IL

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

October 4-5: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Paul, MN
Contact: Ginger Young, Central Missouri State University, Humphreys 120, 320 Goodrich Drive, Warrensburg, MO 64093

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

Nov. 2: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in Portland, OR
Contact: Karen Vaught-Alexander, University of Portland Writing Center, 5000 N. Willamette Blvd., Portland, OR 97203-5798. Phone: 503-283-7461; e-mail: karenva@uofport.edu.

Feb. 28: Northern California Writing Centers Association, in Hayward, CA
Contact: Kimberly Pratt, Division of Language Arts, Chabot College, 25555

Hesperian Blvd., Hayward, CA 94545. Phone: 510-786-6950.

March 1: New England Writing Centers Association, in Providence, RI
Contact: Meg Carroll, Writing Center, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI 02908; e-mail: mcarroll@grog.ric.edu

April 18-20: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Augusta, GA
Contact: Karin Sisk, Augusta College, Writing Center, Dept. of Languages, Literature, and Communications, Augusta, Georgia 30904-2200. Fax: 706-737-1773; phone: 706-737-1402 or 737-1500; e-mail: ksisk@ac.edu.

April 18-19: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Pittsburgh, PA
Contact: Margaret Marshall, Dept. of English, Cathedral of Learning, U. of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260; phone: 412-624-6555; e-mail: marshall+@pitt.edu

Ethics and Diversity

(cont. from page 16)

- conferences when they must deal with student emotions (or their own)?
- How should the tutor cope with the length of the paper in a one-hour conference? Would it be more ethical to talk about the paper globally and discuss a few problems that affect the paper as a whole (at either the organizational or grammatical level)? Or would it be a more useful—and therefore, according to some perspectives, a more ethical—decision to review the paper locally, on a sentence-by-sentence or paragraph-by-paragraph basis, and bypass the issue of complete coverage? Does this decision depend, in part, on funding and the availability of time-slots for

follow-up conferences, or are the two issues independent and unrelated? It seems evident, even from this brief example, that ethics—particularly in the writing center—is an extraordinarily complex matter, and the few questions I've listed here represent only a small portion of the many issues, contexts, and considerations that can impact them. How are we to begin talking about ethics given the multitude of circumstances that converge in writing center tutorials?

This is, of course, the long way of getting around to announcing my plan for this year's columns, which is to confront—head on—the question of what ethics are,

what ethical philosophies we might subscribe to in writing centers, and how these philosophies impact the work we do and the ways we respond to students and faculty. In next month's column, then, I will consider some of the ethical systems that have dominated philosophical thought over the last two thousand years or so and provide a few definitions that we can work with in the columns that follow.

Michael A. Pemberton
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Book Review

Writing Center Perspectives. Byron L. Stay, Christina Murphy and Eric H. Hobson, eds. Emmitsburg, MD: National Writing Centers Association Press, 1995.

Reviewed by Sharon E. Strand, Black Hills State University, Spearfish, SD

Almost monthly a new writing center director breaks into the friendly chatter and serious theoretical discussions of WCenter, the writing center e-mail group, with a desperate plea for the name of THE BOOK which will tell him/her how to set up a new center or revamp an old one. But, so far it has not been possible for any subscriber to WCenter to supply the name of THE BOOK these newbies are in search of. Given the frequency of this frantic request, one might have thought that the first book from the NWCA Press would be that definitive writing center text. Unfortunately, if you are looking for THE BOOK, *Writing Center Perspectives*, edited by Byron L. Stay, Christina Murphy, and Eric H. Hobson, isn't it. But then these editors have not promised to solve all our writing center problems with this text; instead what they offer is a "collection of essays that highlights the diversity of the writing center discipline and records important innovative approaches to defining writing center work within the academy as we approach the twenty-first century and its educational and ideological challenges" (4). The book does, indeed, live up to that promise. *Writing Center Perspectives* follows the lead of earlier books in the field in mirroring the atmosphere and operational philosophies of writing centers. Like writing centers themselves, *Writing Center Perspectives* contains a diversity of voices, presents a variety of metaphors, introduces the tutor/reader to a diverse knowledge base, gently nudges practitioners into new ways of thinking, and appeals to a diverse clientele.

The diversity of voices is introduced as Albert C. DeCiccio, Michael J. Rossi, and Kathleen Shine Cane, in

"Walking the Tightrope: Negotiating Between the Ideal and the Practical in the Writing Center," urge writing center directors to listen not just to those who are publishing writing center theory but also to our own tutors. The authors note that while the language of their tutors may be less sophisticated than what we read in the journals, their arguments are not, and further encourage us to "truly listen to those who live the theory we preach." We hear the voice of the student tutor from Wangeci JoAnn Karui in "Must We Always Grin and Bear It." She thoughtfully and professionally explores the problem for tutors of working with papers containing content repugnant to them. Her research on and suggestions for dealing with this difficult situation demonstrate a maturity beyond her years. And yet, I will not say that. I am reminded daily that those Generation X'ers we associate with are horribly misrepresented in the press and are indeed hardworking, highly intelligent, mature, resourceful people we can trust to carry this tired old world well into the next millennium, as Karui ably demonstrates. Carmen Werder and Roberta R. Buck provide a method for writing center administrators to hear the voices of their tutors in "Assessing Writing Conference Talk: An Ethnographic Method." Their thoughtfully devised assessment system allows a method of being accountable to the institution while extending a measure of control to the tutors themselves. While we are more accustomed to hearing from writing center directors and tutors, we are less accustomed to having Vice Presidents take our work seriously enough to join us in our professional discussion. David Schwalm, Vice President for Academic Programs at Arizona State University West, of-

fers the experience of the reorganization of academic support programs, including the Writing-across-the-Curriculum (WAC) program and the writing center, at his institution as a model for how writing center programs can cooperate with other programs to the benefit of all involved.

Writing center people are fond of creating and examining metaphors to describe our work. Dave Healy explores, in "In the Temple of the Familiar: The Writing Center as Church," the metaphors used to explain writing centers and, finding these metaphors wanting, offers his own metaphor of Writing Center as Church, based on work in the sociology of religion. As he explores the tension between the general and the particular; the relationship among theory, situational context, and praxis; the status of employees; and the status of churches and writing centers as consecrated space, Healy gives writing center practitioners much to think about. In "'Industrial Strength Tutoring': Strategies for Handling 'Customer Complaints,'" Cheryl Reed turns to popular self help books which offer suggestions for survival in problematic work situations to find metaphors tutors can utilize to help negotiate the often muddy waters created by problems that arise when tutors have no control over the assignment or grading policies but are the brunt of complaints about problems in these areas. Donna Fontanarose Rabuck does a masterful job of developing the tutor as midwife metaphor in "Giving Birth to Voice: The Professional Writing Tutor as Midwife." By pointing out the strengths of writing center pedagogy through the midwife analogy, she helps us see how this metaphor works, even for those writing center practitioners

who are not female.

One of the delights for me of working in a writing center is that I never know what will happen when I sit down with a student, but I know each session will be a learning experience for me. That same delight and surprise met me in this book. I learned about the sociology of religion from Dave Healy and wondered how he came to have that knowledge. Cynthia Haynes-Burton's "Intellectual (Proper)ty in Writing Centers: Retro Texts and Positive Plagiarism" provided another sort of surprise. The piece glows with brilliant shifts in meaning and ideas through amazing use of language as it raises questions about implications for writing centers in the ownership of ideas. Despite its intriguing linguistic pyrotechnics, I left thinking that it presents no answers to some very nagging questions.

In trying to decide what to say about Jeanne Simpson's thought-provoking article, "Perceptions, Realities and Possibilities: Central Administration and Writing Centers," the phrase "gentle nudges" came to mind. Often in a tutoring session what we are called on to do is to gently nudge a writer to move from his/her current mindset to one that could be more insightful or more profitable for the writer's success in the academy. This is what Jeanne Simpson has done for writing center directors by introducing the perspective of central administration. She calls on us to be less parochial in our thinking, to become more professional through seeing the "big picture" of the entire institutional setting we operate in. Her call for retaining the high level of "theoretical and pedagogical" preparation we now have while improving on our "managerial and budgetary" preparation is one I would echo loudly.

Another gentle nudge came from Dawn M. Formo and Jennifer Welsh in "Tickling the Student's Ear: Collaboration and the Teacher/Student Relationship" as they explore possible problem areas in an unexamined acceptance of collaborative pedagogy. While they offer no definitive solutions, they ask the questions we should be asking ourselves as we embrace col-

laboration. Julie Hagemann, in "Writing centers as Sites for Writing Transfer Research," moves us to the realization that large scale complicated mechanisms are not necessary for doing significant research in a writing center. Her survey of the reports of activity in tutoring sessions from one student in one semester pointed out the variety of writing tasks students are asked to do. Her research findings correlate with WAC theory and could be used to report the complexity and importance of writing center work. Joseph Saling in "Centering: What Writing Centers Need to Do" nudges us to continually examine what we do so as not to fall into a stifling orthodoxy. He reminds us of the value of our work and encourages us to share our vision beyond the boundaries of our own designated writing center spaces. Moving from administrative to pedagogical concerns, Steve Sherwood's "The Dark Side of the Helping Personality: Student Dependency and the Potential for Tutor Burnout" leads us to realize that by being too helpful to students, writing center practitioners risk burnout for themselves and dependency by the writers. Jane Cogie in "Resisting the Editorial Urge in Writing Center Conferences: An Essential Focus in Tutor Training" reminds us that it is necessary to always renew ourselves in writing center work. She offers a training method that provides both new and seasoned tutors with ways of developing effective tutoring strategies.

The article by Mark L. Waldo, Jacob Blumner, and Mary Webb, "Writing Centers and Writing Assessment: A Discipline-Based Approach," highlights the diversity of writing centers as they explore the problems of large scale writing assessment and report on the form assessment has taken through the WAC program housed in the writing center at the University of Nevada-Reno. Another integration of writing center and WAC concerns is shown in Robert W. Holderer's "Holistic Scoring: A Valuable Tool for Improving Writing Across the Curriculum" as he describes how helping instructors in the disciplines develop and use holistic scoring guides helped improve students' writing processes. These scoring guides were, in turn, used by the writing center staff to focus on problem areas and

thus improve service to the students. Jean Kiedaish and Sue Dinitz highlight the diversity of services offered by writing centers in "Using Collaborative Groups to Teach Critical Thinking." They offer insight into why small group discussions assisted art history students to develop their thinking for papers for their class.

Overall, I found that the articles in *Writing Center Perspectives* across the board have a maturity, a professional tone and attitude of expertise not seen in earlier writing center publications. Blessedly gone is the whining "I'm a victim of misunderstanding by the institution" attitude scattered throughout prior works. An example of the new professional tone is found in Joe Law's "Accreditation and the Writing Center: A Proposal for Action." Law calls on the NWCA to develop an accreditation program similar to those processes colleges and universities undergo. While he only sketches out the dimensions of his idea, it is one that should be acted upon as it will lead to more professionalism in the field and better service to our clientele. For presenting the variety and depth of work writing center professionals perform daily, this book is one that should be on every writing center bookshelf. But someone still needs to write THE BOOK.

Call for submissions

Submissions for the Fall, 1996, issue of the *Dangling Modifier*—a newsletter for peer tutors by peer tutors—should be submitted to the Penn State Writing Center before September 15, 1996. Articles should be less than 500 words. Shorter submissions—tips, anecdotes, wise sayings, cartoons—are also welcome. Please include your telephone number or e-mail address so that we can contact you about editorial changes. Contact us if you have any questions. Phone: (814) 865-0259 or e-mail: tlb171@psu.edu (Tshawna Byerly). Send submissions to: Penn State Writing Center, 219 Boucke Building, University Park, PA 16802. Fax (814) 863-9814.

Promotional ideas for writing centers

A solid marketing plan is the basis for effective advertising or promotion. Creating a marketing plan involves the following steps:

1. Define your marketing objectives
2. Analyze your situation, both narrowly and broadly
3. Define your target market(s), and then narrow your focus further to define niche market(s)
4. Learn as much as you can about your potential clients
5. Choose appropriate advertising and promotional strategies
6. Put the marketing plan in action

Getting exciting promotional ideas is only one step in the process, and latching onto techniques that have worked for others when you don't have a marketing plan in place for yourself increases the chances that you'll spend your time and effort to good effect. When you are ready to consider promotional ideas, the following list should help. The categories are based on the type of promotional activity and the amount of work required.

Advertising, regular

(not live; once the promotional idea is prepared, it takes no more or little more work until it is replaced)

- Produce a pamphlet or brochure
- Have a good location for the center, preferably a convenient, high-traffic area
- Use the campus computer bulletin board
- Have a description (prominent, properly indexed, and of appropriate tone) in the campus Calendar
- Include center information in institutional recruitment materials

- Send center information to students conditionally admitted if appropriate
- Send center information to students put on academic probation
- Display posters
- Distribute bookmarks (e.g., have the bookstore give them to customers; leave stacks at the library checkout and at the Registrar's counter)
- Distribute center pens and pencils
- Create center stationery (letterhead, memo paper, note pads)
- Provide tutors with business cards
- Provide center tee-shirts for tutors and as prizes for students, faculty, or staff
- Establish a World Wide Web page or other electronic avenue
- Make a video of the center
- Run a series of print ads in the student newspaper, etc.
- Advertise on student radio
- Create a display for display cases, tables at events, and bulletin boards reserved for the center
- Match the physical layout and decor with the center's desired image
- Select "corporate colors" appropriate for the center's desired image, and use these on handouts, stationery, etc.
- Make certain that signs make the center easy to find
- Have an appropriate name for the center
- Create a slogan
- Select an appropriate logo
- Tie center goals to the institution's mission
- Post photos of staff near the

- entrance to the center
- Post a clear, obvious procedure for first-time clients to follow
- Keep the door open and display a welcome sign
- Have computers available for student use
- Offer candy

Advertising, irregular

(not live; done periodically and usually created from scratch each time)

- Place a tip of the month on cafeteria tables, etc.
- Send tutoring summary forms to faculty
- Share testimonials from clients
- Make known the credentials of center staff and tutors
- Conduct a needs assessment of students, staff/administration, and faculty, report the results, and show action on the results
- Perform a cost/benefit analysis
- Issue press releases at every opportunity
- Produce a semester report (which is readily available, easy to read, and replete with statistics emphasizing whatever is most important in your situation)
- Use the electronic bulletin board (e.g., Dynacom)
- Be included in others' newsletters
- Publish a center newsletter
- Submit articles or a regular column for the student newspaper
- Tie center goals to current concerns of senior administration
- Produce case studies in print and/or video of (successful) clients

- Evaluate regularly and publish the results
- Pay close attention to small details to serve the client better
- Get press in the local paper

Personal appearance, regular

- Ask clients to return
- Encourage clients to set up a series of appointments
- Assign tutors or “writing fellows” to particular classes

Personal appearance, irregular

- Speak to department meetings
- Present in-class workshops
- Participate in student orientation (e.g., make presentations to students, be involved in training Residence Hall Assistants, offer tours of the center, give workshops, attend departmental “parties” for students, staff a campus information booth, set up a display table, flip burgers at a bar-b-que, etc.)
- Network with colleges or high schools feeding into your institution
- Promote the center during new faculty and staff orientation
- Give five-minute information blurbs to selected classes
- Pay close attention to small details to serve the client better
- Interview faculty about particular assignments, ask for A papers, explain the center, and ask for referrals
- Cultivate a supporter in high places
- Offer tours of the center
- Hand out brochures, etc. in registration line-ups
- Demonstrate conferences in classes
- Talk up the center whenever and wherever
- Perform skits about the center, e.g., exaggerate common misconceptions

Into the center

- Invite selected faculty, staff, and administration to observe in the center
- Invite faculty, staff, and administration to use the center
- Ask the president of the institution to use the center
- Invite faculty, staff, and administration to volunteer in the center
- Create a center advisory committee with a representative from each academic division

Other people advertise

- Mail to all faculty a brochure and a cover letter encouraging faculty to mention the center to classes and to refer students
- Ask faculty to attach a center brochure to their syllabi or include center hours in their syllabi
- Ask selected staff to refer students, e.g., reference librarians
- Encourage promotion by word of mouth (ask students, faculty, staff, and administrators to spread the word)
- Ask the recruitment personnel to mention the center frequently and recommend it
- Ask guides conducting tours for the public to mention and explain the center
- Ask academic advisors to mention and recommend the center
- Ask entrance testers to mention the center
- Ask reference librarians to refer students

Special Events

- Hold a writing contest (this may culminate in a gala event)
- Hold a read-a-thon (participants each spend five to ten minutes reading their writing)
- Sponsor a major event, e.g., a conference, a speakers series

- Publish, and promote the center’s accomplishments
- Make conference presentations (especially with your tutors)
- Decorate the center for certain holidays, special occasions, etc.
- Hold a party for faculty, staff, students (with a theme such as poetry reading or without a theme, e.g., an open house)

Indirect Promotion

(activities which do not have as their primary purpose promotion of the center)

- Offer workshops for faculty professional development
- Act as a research site
- Conduct research solo and with various faculty
- Offer workshops during new faculty and staff orientation
- Speak to classes likely to have good tutors
- Create an excellent tutor training program
- Create a certified tutor training program
- Create a tutor training course for credit
- Involve faculty in tutor training
- Help the tutors have a good experience working in the center
- Sit on committees
- Get to know faculty informally, e.g., over lunch
- Organize a journal club for faculty and staff
- Team teach
- Teach credit courses
- Have an external evaluation
- Set up satellite centers in high-volume places such as Residence Halls

Jim Bell
U. of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, BC, Canada

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Ethics and Diversity

As I read Lisa Ede's response to Terrance Riley and Stephen North in the Spring 1996 issue of the *Writing Center Journal*, I was quite impressed, as usual, by the overall quality of her arguments, I was particularly struck by a short passage in which she discusses some of the problems inherent in talking about writing centers—and the people who work in them—as a collective “us”:

“If the past holds more stories than conventional histories have narrated [referring to Peter Carino's article on “Early Writing Centers: Toward a History”], might not such diversity also characterize the present? I believe that such is the case and that it is important to consider this diversity, particularly when making broad recommendations about what centers should and should not do. If we kept this diversity clearly in view we would recognize that the dangers and opportunities that professionalization offers a writing center staffed by teaching assistants in a major research university would differ substantially from those faced by a writing center staffed by undergraduate writing assistants in a small liberal arts college, or by part-time instructors in a community college.” (116)

Ede echoes here the point which I have often made in this column regarding writing centers and ethics. The institutional positioning, the social contexts, the economic circumstances, and the very culture of the academy in which writing centers operate will, in large measure, create the foundational principles which, in turn, will determine the ethical frameworks they use to establish administrative policies and guide their tutoring practices.

But writing center ethics are even more complex than the cultural features of academic life can account for. While they may be deeply immersed in the general contexts of institutional location and administration, they are also rooted in the particular circumstances of student, tutor, and text. Consider, for example, the many ethically relevant features that emerge from the following situation:

The writing center at Medium State U., a four-year state university, is staffed with two graduate student tutors and fifteen undergraduate tutors from a variety of majors, though most of the tutors come from humanistic disciplines such as English and Speech Communication. The writing center is open only about six hours a day, five days a week, and students generally place a tremendous demand for tutorial assistance during those hours. Though most students can be accommodated at some time on the same day that they contact the center for an appointment, during busy times of the semester they sometimes have to sign up for conferences two days in advance, just to be assured of getting a time slot. The center's budget is stretched thin, there are no more funds to hire additional tutors, and the writing center director must struggle with campus administrators annually to justify continued funding at the same level. The director is a non-tenured, though tenure-track, assistant professor in the English department, and the administrative duties of running a writing center have detracted somewhat from her ability to establish a strong publication record on a par with her peers in the department.

Into this writing center and this context comes a student with a paper. The student is twenty-five years old, is working on his Master's degree in civil engineering, and English is not his native language. The text he brings in is a draft of his Master's thesis, a fifty-page document on “The Tensile Dynamics of T-Rod Supports in Suspension Bridges: A Computer Model,” and nearly every page contains complex formulas and detailed charts. The paper itself is filled with handwritten notes, circles, and arrows, most of them suggestions and comments from the student's graduate advisor, and on the last page is a note from the advisor berating the student for his poor grammar skills and demanding that he take the paper to the writing center for “repair.” The student resents having to come into the center, saying it makes him feel like a “dummy,” and he demands that the tutor proofread the paper and fix it up for him. The conference is scheduled to last for one hour.

What should the tutor do in a situation like this? What is the appropriate response? Though these questions, on one level, address the immediate practical exigencies of tutorial work in a writing center—quick assessments of texts, quick assessments of needs, quick assessments of personalities and stress levels, quick assessments of the “best” tutorial pedagogy—they are also deeply ethical questions. They require tutors to make complex and cognitively challenging judgments about the most effective and most responsible course of action in given situations, and they demand that tutors weigh in the balance a diverse assortment of overlapping contexts, desires, and institutional demands.

If we use the hypothetical case above as an example, we can see how ethically convoluted even the most seem-

ingly straightforward decisions can be in tutorial conferences. To begin with, the student's agenda for the conference—that the tutor must do the proofreading—must be addressed, and the response to this agenda will be inflected, partly, by any explicit policies for or against proofreading in the writing center. If there are formal guidelines which prevent tutors from proofreading student papers in conferences, then it may be the tutor's responsibility to ignore or finesse the student's stated wishes. Similarly, if the instructional mission of the writing center emphasizes the higher-order problems of discourse (organization, development, tone, etc.) over the lower-order matters (grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.), then the tutor may feel an even greater sense of obligation to direct the conference away from the text-based, surface-level agenda that the student came in with. On the other hand, if the paper's most significant problems seem to be at the level of surface features—problems with idioms, definite

articles, or other ESL markers—then the tutor might feel that some type of proofreading in the conference session would actually be the most helpful to the student, in spite of general dicta to the contrary. The instructor's comments also make it clear that grammatical issues are the teacher's primary concern for the next revision, so the tutor may feel responsible for helping the student make the changes that might lead to a higher grade on the paper and give faculty the sense that the writing center is responding to their needs. Belinda Droll sees such teacher expectations as “a powerful third force in tutoring sessions” (*WLN* 17.9) and makes the case that overlooking or ignoring the instructor's rhetorical emphases in a conference may actually hurt both the student and the writing center in the long run. Tutors must therefore weigh the consequences of subverting the explicit agendas put forth by instructor and student and determine whether the outcome of doing so will lead to a greater “good” than

otherwise. If the director's status in the university is tenuous and uncertain, she might be more willing to have her tutors remain flexible about proofreading policies in the interest of generating goodwill among faculty who might have some influence on future funding—or tenure—decisions.

Additional ethical concerns and questions arise as well:

- Who is the most appropriate tutor for this student? A graduate student or an undergraduate? A tutor from the same or a different major? A tutor with the same language background or a native speaker? A male or a female? How deeply will the disciplinary discourse evident in the paper affect the shape of the conference; to what extent should specialized discourse issues be a matter of concern?
- How should the student's hostile attitude be handled? Sympathetically? Firmly? What are the rights and responsibilities of tutors in

(cont. on page 10)



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

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