

# THE WRITING AB

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Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of  
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## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

On page 13 of this issue is a message from Joan Mullin, the new president of our national organization, the National Writing Centers Association, asking you to think about various NWCA concerns and to send her your comments. You may also want to send your comments and questions to the newsletter as well so that we can use the newsletter as a forum for public discussion. In particular, the issue of offering some form of outside assessment for writing centers who request it is a complex one that will benefit from your insights, concerns, and suggestions. There will be discussion of all this at the next Conference on College Composition and Communication, in Phoenix, in March, but not all of us will be there. So, please consider the newsletter as another forum for you to join the public discussion of all this. You can send me a letter or an e-mail message (see the box on page 2 for our addresses).

Also, as many of you meet for spring conferences of regional groups, please remember to send calls for papers and registration announcements to the newsletter at least a month in advance of the issue in which you'd like the announcement to appear.

• Muriel Harris, editor

## ...INSIDE...

Consulting with ESL Students in an Engineering Writing Center: Issues and Strategies for Dealing with the Problem of Plagiarism

• Kristin Walker 1

Who Holds the Pen?—  
The Writer, Naturally

• Theresa Ammirati 7

Tutors' Column:  
"Eight Tips for the Writing Tutor"

• Harvey Venia 9

The Triangle of Success  
in Tutoring

• Jessica A. Inglis 10

NWCA News

• Joan Mullin 13

Writing Center Ethics:  
"Discerning and Discriminating among Multiple Contexts"

• Michael A. Pemberton 14

Conference Calendar 16

## Consulting with ESL students in an engineering writing center: Issues and strategies for dealing with the problem of plagiarism

*Plagiarism* is an ugly word. Students across the disciplines, but especially in English, are instructed to avoid plagiarizing or risk the chance of receiving a failing grade on their papers. As an instructor, I can remember telling my English 100 students, "Whenever you use someone else's words, you have to use quotation marks." In the writing center, I might read a student's words that sounded out of place stylistically and ask tactfully, "Are these your own words?" When I think back to these comments, I realize they are nebulous: they didn't indicate to the students what was wrong with using someone else's words as their own, and they certainly weren't specific about exactly what constituted plagiarism. I did not

attempt to draw a line between what was plagiarism and what was not; now I know that the reason I wasn't more clear is because I myself was not sure where using common knowledge in my writing stopped and where plagiarism began.

The difficulty about plagiarism is that there are so many ways to define it. A recent *Council Chronicle* article contains the opinions of educators discussing varying degrees of plagiarism in different disciplines: from copying a

sentence word for word to summarizing an idea in the same format in which the author had communicated it. If the academic world has difficulty deciding what is plagiarism and what is not, our students, who are often not told specifically what plagiarism is or how to avoid it, are in an especially precarious position. In addition, different disciplines have different ideas about what constitutes plagiarism. Because plagiarism has unique implications for ESL students in an engineering context and because the engineering environment can cause ESL students to have particular difficulty with plagiarism, I offer strategies writing center consultants can use to help ESL students avoid plagiarism in technical writing.

The Electrical and Computer Engineering (ECE) Writing Center is housed in the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department of the College of Engineering at the University of South Carolina, Columbia Campus, and opened as part of a Gateway Engineering Education Coalition Project to help students in engineering communicate more effectively. One main goal of the Project is to establish a writing component to EECE 201, Tools and Techniques for Electrical and Computer Engineers. In this course, students attend a recitation and labs and visit the Writing Center every other week to meet in peer groups to discuss their lab reports and lab notebooks. A Writing Center consultant (there are three of us) leads a group discussion about technical writing, including such topics as introductions to lab reports, abstracts, audience, divisions, documentation, and revision at various points in the semester. Also, she encourages students to reflect upon and discuss the processes they went through in writing their reports: Were there any stumbling blocks? Did they receive any puzzling comments from the instructor or teaching assistants? Did they feel they had received enough information from the recitation and lab instruction to write their lab reports ef-

fectively? With the feedback from the other students, learning technical writing becomes easier for each student, and the consultant collaborates with the course professor and the teaching assistant graders so that there is clear communication about what is required of the students in the course.

Another goal of the Gateway Coalition Project is to allow for consulting opportunities for individual students in other engineering classes. Since there are a number of ESL students within the ECE Department (roughly 10% of undergraduate students and 60-70% of graduate students), a lot of them seek help from the ECE Writing Center. Very quickly, the consultants discovered that plagiarism was a problem for some of these students for several reasons: the summarizing and paraphrasing that are essential components of reports, cultural differences about using another writer's ideas, technical writing conventions (such as long strings of technical words that cannot be separated and sections from source articles that must be replicated in students' reports in the same format), and general demands of the engineering program.

In most of the upper level EECE courses, the course requirements include writing a research report in which the students research a topic and synthesize various parts of a number of articles and write about them objectively. Students do not need to include their own opinions; the report is basically summative. Because of the instructions, summary and paraphrase are the main components of the assignment. George Braine, in his essay "Writing in the Natural Sciences and Engineering," applies these characteristics to engineering report writing in general: "Paraphrase and summary appear to be the overwhelmingly dominant skills required in the writing of . . . reports" (126-27). These skills can be difficult for ESL students who are still learning English as well as the technical content of the reports they are reading and technical writing conventions.

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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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Joel Bloch and Lan Chi draw a comparison between ESL writers and developmental writers: both are prone to plagiarism because they are trying to learn the academic discourse requirements of their disciplines (238). But ESL students have an especially difficult task: not only do they have to discern how to write appropriately for a particular discipline such as engineering; they also are writing in a foreign language. For these reasons, ESL students may plagiarize (intentionally or unintentionally), simply to facilitate conforming to the standards of their discipline, both in the language it uses and the format it requires.

Differing cultural backgrounds may cause ESL students to have permissive attitudes towards plagiarism as well. Some cultures, such as the Chinese society, value classic authors. These authors are so valued that copying (plagiarizing) their words is considered honoring those traditional authors (Reid 251). Also, Chinese students see themselves as subordinate to these classical authors; paraphrasing them or summarizing their ideas in the students' own words is out of the question because that action would be dishonoring the person who originated the ideas. Bloch and Chi explain more about the Chinese culture and how its view of plagiarism differs from ours:

Confucianism and the civil service examinations are both, in fact, logical sources of the problem [of plagiarism]. Confucianism has long been seen as a philosophy which places great emphasis on memorizing the classic texts and being able to recite them by heart. . . . [I]n traditional Chinese thinking, the ability to recite the content of the classic texts is more important than the ability to produce original ideas. It is this tradition of transmitting information but not creating new information that is often cited as the reason that Chinese students may have difficulty with the rhetorical demands of English-language compositions. (232)

It is easy to see how ESL students could commit plagiarism without even knowing it: since some of their assignments require summarizing and using the author's ideas, they might use some of the author's words, simply because the students thought the author communicated the ideas best. An even more demanding assignment would be one that required the students to originate their own ideas or arguments using the writing of published authors. Since reciting others' ideas is more important than the creation of new ones, according to Bloch and Chi, the students will be caught between paying allegiance to published authors and obeying the professor, an authority figure who is to be respected.

Yet another reason ESL students may plagiarize is that technical writing conventions are different from any other writing they have encountered. One rule for non-technical writing is not to copy more than three consecutive words in a row. Writing in a technical context does not have such strict requirements, but the limit of words that can be copied before the writing is considered plagiarism is not clear. Technical writing is often filled with strings of jargon, names, or ordered words that simply cannot be altered. Consider the following excerpt taken from an abstract of an article titled "Further Development and New Applications for the TRALLFA Robot":

The TRALLFA Robot, originally characterized as a multi-purpose programmable memory controlled Robot with continuous path type control, has (though well established within industrial coating applications with more than 300 installations world wide), during the last year, proven its suitability in a complete new application—Automatic Arc Welding. Recent development of the TRALLFA Robot has led to the possible optional use of a **computer-based control system with a magnetic tape or disc memory**, which gives a more flexible solution with respect to e.g. **program capacity, program**

#### **search time and robot/conveyor synchronization.**

The word sequences in bold indicate the problem a student in technical writing would have with the rule "Don't copy more than three consecutive words in a row." For ESL students as well as native English speaking students, how many words they can copy before plagiarizing is a mystery, and for ESL students already struggling to adapt to the English language, these uncertainties about unclear technical writing conventions can cause even more confusion.

In addition to the word order in technical documents, the format of transferring information in sections from the source article to the paraphrased or summarized student's work is important, too, in technical writing and differs significantly from the ordering of information in the writing done for composition classes. According to Braine,

[t]he analysis of experimental reports revealed that, to a large extent, information had to be transferred from the assignment handout or a reading to the report. However, this information has to be transferred in the same sequence as in the original, a practice not usually required in most summary writing. For instance, in the typical composition class, the rearrangement of information is not only allowed, but may even be encouraged for stylistic purposes. Such rearrangement of information would not be acceptable in the writing of experimental reports. (127)

ESL students who have taken a composition class may be confused by the difference in sequencing information in composition and engineering writing styles. Moreover, once students realize that duplicating the order of information found in the source article is important in engineering, they may assume that duplicating the words, or at least some of them, is more acceptable than in a composition class context. ESL students may become discouraged

from trying to make their reports their own if they have to use not only other writers' ideas but also their formats; thus, they may resort to simply copying everything from the source article.

Because ESL students will be learning how to summarize and paraphrase, adapt to American academic culture, and incorporate academic discourse conventions within the context of technical writing, they may resort to plagiarism simply because they cannot meet all the academic demands that are being placed on them, not to mention other pressures of living in a foreign environment. Engineering is a rigorous discipline, one that requires grueling hours devoted to labs, research, and writing reports that often contain lengthy equations, procedures, analyses, and evaluations. Even native English speakers have difficulty adjusting to the demands of the engineering program. How understandable it is, therefore, that some ESL students succumb to the temptation to copy another writer's work because they need to meet the strict deadlines and requirements of their discipline.

For all of these reasons, the consultants in the ECE Writing Center see ESL students who plagiarize. Not all ESL students in the ECE Department do, and it's not always easy to tell if a student has plagiarized or not. The next section of this essay focuses on how consultants in writing centers can help students they know have plagiarized. Of the obvious plagiarists, there are two main kinds: unintentional and intentional. There are different strategies for helping both.

Many ESL students who plagiarize don't know they've done so, or they know they have done it and want help in remedying the problem. Recently, I helped a student I'll call Jia, who came to the center with a paper containing few errors in grammar. When I commented on the scarcity of errors, he responded, "Well, I copied most of it." I began to launch into my speech about

the ethical consequences of plagiarism, but he interrupted me. "I know it's wrong," he said. "I want to fix it." Jia explained to me that writing reports was difficult for him and that he would try forming a paraphrase in his native language before writing it in English, but the final version would not communicate accurately the meaning of the original. Jia did not have the source articles with him, so we used the information he had written in his draft to work on the copied material. Since the ECE Writing Center had just opened, Jia was the first ESL client concerned about plagiarism that I had helped in an engineering context, and I wasn't sure what to recommend because I could clearly see his problem (due to the excessively technical language and format involved). Finally, after collaborating with Jia, we discovered four ways to help him re-form his report writing:

1) Reorganize information from the article so that it matches what the professor wants. (This step appears to contradict what Braine says about using the same sequence as the source article, but for Jia's paper, all the information from the source article did not need to be included in the final report, so Jia had the option of picking out what sections to include that would best meet the assignment.)

2) Create an introduction that previews the organization of the report; use original topic sentences for the paragraphs; use transitions between paragraphs. (All of these organization and transition features were to be in Jia's own words.)

3) Focus on sections that the professor would be interested in, based on the assignment. (In other words, include more information on crucial parts of the report, and, if possible, emphasize by location the report's important parts.)

4) Select key terms in the report and write about them in original language. (This step involves learning the vocabulary needed to understand the source article; by focusing on learning the key terms, Jia could better under-

stand the information in the article.)

I also suggested that Jia read sections from the source, look away, and then try to write them in his own words. After writing the paraphrase, he could look back to the article to check for accuracy. Trying to paraphrase a section at a time without any additional steps may have been too difficult for Jia to do.

Although perhaps more time consuming, detailed strategies are available to help ESL students understand source articles and write about them in their own words. Glen Rice, a professor at English Programs for Internationals at the University of South Carolina, participated in a workshop the ECE Writing Center recently gave for engineering teaching assistants in order to teach them how to evaluate the writing in the lab reports they were grading. Rice discussed how to help ESL students read better and introduced the idea that writing summaries of source articles greatly improves reading comprehension. Much of what Rice discussed applies to ESL students who not only have to understand the material but also have to summarize and paraphrase it in their reports. The complete thirteen-step handout is included on page 6, but the following list of abbreviated steps indicates the value it has for ESL students with plagiarism problems:

### Summary Guidelines (abbreviated from the original)

- 1) Preview the article.
- 2) Read the article and underline.
- 3) Make boxes over key ideas.
- 4) Make an informal outline of key ideas.
- 5) Write summary from outline.
- 6) Include in the first sentence the title of the article and its main idea.
- 7) Remind the reader at the end that you are summarizing another's work.
- 8) You may quote the author once, briefly, using quotation

marks.

- 9) Include a personal response at the end.
- 10) Check to see you have copied no more than three consecutive words. (This number will vary in an engineering context.)
- 11) Read the summary out loud.
- 12) Look for grammar mistakes.
- 13) Type your summary and use spell check.

Not all of these tips will work for every engineering assignment; for example, step nine, "Include a personal response at the end," will not be appropriate in a report that synthesizes only the research of others. However, in an argumentative technical research report, step nine would be appropriate. And step ten, "Check to see you have copied no more than three consecutive words," will have to be broadened to apply to long strings of technical terminology. One drawback of using such summary guidelines is that the process appears to be very time consuming, and most ESL engineering students don't have a lot of free time. The time it takes each student to complete some or all of these steps will vary, but if the student truly wants to avoid plagiarism, writing may take a bit longer, especially in the beginning when the student may have to go through all the steps I mentioned to ensure producing acceptable work. In time, some of the steps will become automatic; for example, once the student becomes accustomed to looking for main ideas in each paragraph, he/she will be able to pick out those ideas later without as much effort or time. In the Center, the consultants have found that these steps not only are helpful to ESL students but also are encouraging to them: the steps give the students something concrete to help "fix" their plagiarism problems, problems that they were aware of but didn't know how to eliminate.

Some ESL students visit the ECE Writing Center knowing they have plagiarized, but they have done it intentionally and readily admit that they have. One of the Writing Center consultants recently met with a student named "Chu." When the consultant read Chu's paper, she had some questions about the technical content. Chu had his textbook with him and turned to the articles he had used as sources. As the consultant compared the source articles to Chu's report, she discovered Chu had copied his entire report word for word from the textbook. The consultant thought that since Chu was from an Asian background he had plagiarized because he thought that he was honoring the person who had written the textbook. When the consultant began explaining the attitude of American academia towards plagiarism of this kind, Chu interrupted her. "I know about plagiarism, and I did it on purpose," he said. "Everybody does it. The professors have so many reports to read that there is no way they can read everyone's sources, so no one ever finds out," he claimed. The consultant was surprised at Chu's candid response, but she firmly explained that plagiarism was not acceptable in this academic environment, even if everyone else was doing it. Chu said that the main reason he had plagiarized was that he couldn't understand the technical content of the source articles enough to write about them in his own words. The consultant suggested that if Chu couldn't write about this topic in his own words, he should find another topic. Chu seemed to understand the problem of plagiarism in his current paper, but he wasn't sure whether he had enough time to choose another topic because the report was due soon. The writing consultation ended with the consultant not knowing whether her advice had done much good.

A couple of days later, Chu returned for an appointment with another consultant. Chu had changed his topic, and it was obvious that he had not copied the source article because there were many grammar, sentence structure, and

organization problems that indicated that this language was his own. Apparently, Chu had known about plagiarism and had committed it intentionally but needed to be told about its gravity and the possible consequences he would suffer if his professor found out (most professors give students who plagiarize 0's on their reports). Consultants who find themselves in similar situations may need to adopt the frank, conversational approach that the ECE Writing Center consultant did in order to successfully deter intentional plagiarists.

Over the past six months, our consultants have learned the value of being direct when talking with ESL students about plagiarism. Now, I hear myself explaining cultural differences and technical writing conventions to ESL students who may have plagiarized, instead of making nebulous comments about using quotation marks. I find myself sympathizing with the pressure ESL students are under to succeed and try to explain to them that while learning to write using engineering's conventions may be time consuming and frustrating now, the skills they will learn in the process will greatly benefit them not only in future classes but also in their current or future jobs in industry or research. Helping these dedicated students see that avoiding plagiarism is important for these reasons helps students like Jia and Chu see the value of investing more of their time now in writing their technical reports.

As writing continues to become an integral part of many disciplines from the humanities to the sciences, knowing what constitutes plagiarism in each discipline becomes increasingly important. By helping such students as these, the ECE Writing Center communicates the importance of avoiding plagiarism in a technical context within the discipline of engineering.

Kristin Walker  
University of South Carolina  
Columbia, SC

## Summary Guidelines

(taken from Glen Rice, English Programs for Internationals, University of South Carolina)

### ***What is a summary?***

A summary restates the main ideas of an author (without most of the details) in your own words. It is generally about 1/4 of the length of the original.

### ***Why are summaries important?***

In the university you often have to write library research papers. In these papers you gather information from many sources and include this information in your paper. A few direct quotes are allowed, but generally you are expected to summarize or paraphrase this information in your own words. (You also have to indicate the source.) Summary writing gives you practice in this rather difficult task. Most students also tell me that when they write summaries, their understanding of what they are reading improves. In addition, by the end of the quarter many of my students say that they feel their writing has improved as well, and I would agree. Finally, as students use new words they have learned in their summary, their vocabulary improves as well.

### ***How do I write a summary?***

(Check off each step as you do it.)

1. Preview the article (read the title, sub-title, headings, first paragraph, first sentence of the following paragraphs, and the last paragraph). Get an overall idea of what this article is about. This is when you should use your dictionary. Look up unknown words that seem to be important from your preview.
2. Read the article. Underline (about 20%) as you read.
3. Go back over the article and make boxes over just the key words/phrases that you underlined. The boxes should remind you of the author's main idea. (Boxes should equal about 5% of the article.) If I give you study questions to help you find the main ideas, answer those in your own words.
4. Make an informal outline of the article from your "boxes." Usually, but not always, you should include in your outline one main idea from every paragraph of the article. Emphasize the points the author emphasizes.
5. Begin to write your summary from your outline, without looking at the original article.
6. Your first sentence should approximately follow this model: "In his article 'March on Washington' (*Newsweek*, April 8, 1991) Osborn Elliot (discusses, states, argues, describes). . . ." MAKE SURE THAT YOUR FIRST SENTENCE GIVES THE THESIS (i.e. main thrust) OF THE ARTICLE.
7. At a later point in your summary remind us one more time that you are summarizing another person's work: e.g. "Mr. Elliot (or 'the author') also (states, believes, argues, etc.). . . ."
8. If you want to, you may directly quote the author once briefly. Use quotation marks.
9. Include a response at the end. Mark it "MY RESPONSE." Here and only here should you include your opinions.
10. Go back over your summary and check that you have not copied more than three consecutive words. (By all means, use new vocabulary from this article in your summary, but do not copy more than three words in a row.)
11. Now read your summary out loud and make sure that your meaning will be clear to someone who has not read the article.
12. Now read your summary out loud a second time, and look for grammar mistakes. Especially look for mistakes in: 1) run-ons, 2) verb tenses, 3) articles, 4) spelling of easy words
13. Type your summary and use spell-check. For most of the articles we read in this class your summaries should be not less than 200 words nor more than 250 words. Learning to type now (we have software to help you with this) will save you time later. In the university, papers you write almost always have to be typed.

# Who holds the pen?— The writer, naturally<sup>1</sup>

Recent discussions about the value of directive tutoring argue that it is an undervalued technique that should be added to the writing center's repertoire. Anyone who has spent time tutoring knows how much simpler life would be if tutors could simply tell writers what to do to make their papers better. Not only would tutoring sessions go more quickly, writing center directors might be spared the kind of phone call I receive from time to time from colleagues who wonder why their student's paper received only a "C" when that student had come to the writing center for help. My response might be echoed by many other writing center personnel: "If the tutor had written the paper, it might have received an 'A,' but unfortunately we can't write a student's paper. All the tutor can do is be a guide, and too much 'guidance' can turn the paper into the tutor's work rather than the writer's." My colleagues understand that argument, and subsequent conversation, usually focuses on the two reasons why the writing center must offer a tutoring approach that lets writers learn to help themselves, that is, the authorization (literally and figuratively) of students through guided questioning—or non directive tutoring—and the maintaining of academic honesty and credibility.

Obviously, to maintain credibility in an academic institution, where honesty is a cornerstone, papers must belong to the writers who compose them. Because my school has an honor code, administered by students and respected by faculty, I may be particularly sensitive to the question of not only who holds the pen but who owns the paper. And apart from concerns about paper ownership, I am also concerned about

the best ways to help students become confident, able writers who locate authority within themselves. I am not overly fond of cliché, but the Chinese idea of teaching others to fish, rather than giving them their mullet already filleted, is the idea operating here. Although it is a slow process that is sometimes unsatisfying to the student writer who is looking for immediate answers, and frustrating to the tutor who could give those answers in a minute, non-directive tutoring is the best approach to answering these concerns, and ought to be a foundation for writing centers where these issues are also paramount.

This is not to say that I do not also share the concerns of my colleagues who favor directive tutoring. Students, after all, do not often come to us as founts of knowledge about writing. "If I knew what was wrong, much less how to fix it," they say in one way or another, "I wouldn't have to be here at all." While non-directive tutoring may be viewed by its proponents as part of a conversation all writers must engage in, a mutual movement of tutor and writer toward some resolution of the writer's questions, if tutors practice it in a dilatory way, or with slavish adherence to the principle of non-directiveness and without concern for the writer, it can be a most unsatisfactory experience for both.

Certainly it is important to model, and no less important to show a writer that a certain sentence is unclear, or a particular word doesn't mean what the writer intended it to mean. But a replacement word offered as one possibility among many can easily turn into a complete sentence as the writer passively sits by, while the tutor gives

even more variations on the written sentence, until, together, they pick the right one, the one the writer might have written had he only thought about it. Similarly, a line drawn through the wrong word not only tells the writer there is something wrong, it also prompts that writer to look at the tutor as the center of authority. Putting aside questions of negative effects on the insecure writer's already shaky ego (at least when it comes to academic papers), our aim is to help inexperienced writers find ways to develop authority within themselves—to make our job self-limiting—as writers learn how to help themselves become better.

One way to avoid overly directive tutoring is through questions that lead writers to understand where the audience (who is at this moment the tutor) might have questions about the work. But this is not to say that a tutor must ask only Rogerian questions—those open-ended and sometimes confusing questions that leave that writer without a clue as to how he or she should proceed with a paper that was no doubt problematic to begin with. In fact, even a questioning approach has its pitfalls. Questions designed to lead writers into considering the strength of their argument can easily be misphrased. As a tutor asks, "Was this what you meant?" and follows that with a rephrasing of the writer's words, there is a danger of the tutor's revising the work, while the writer, too insecure to speak out loud, echoes Prufrock by saying internally, "That was not what I meant at all."

So, then, what do we do? We start, I think, by deciding what we want to accomplish. Is it to have writers leave the writing center with perfect papers? Then directive tutoring may be just the

thing. Certainly it will help writers to understand what the issues are in writing and to know what someone (that is, the tutor) thinks is right or wrong, clear or unclear. But will it help students to find ways to help themselves become better writers? Will it make the job of the writing center self-limiting as the writer becomes stronger, more able, more certain about the power of the paper and the writing that informs it? I think not. Directive tutoring tells the student what is wrong with the paper, provides answers to how to fix it, and makes at least some part of the paper the tutor's rather than the writer's property. It does not, as questioning and other non-directive techniques do, place the authority for the paper in the writer's hands; it does not, I am afraid, let a writer find ways to solve problems that have not yet arisen, or come up with a heuristic that will be applicable to papers not yet written.

Those in favor of directive tutoring might argue that in fact such tutoring helps the writer very clearly to understand why the writing doesn't work, what the audience's response might be. They are right. But at the same time it does both less and more than that. That is, it does less in that it focuses the writer on the problems and concerns of only a particular and somewhat authoritative audience—the tutor. And directive tutoring does more, but not in a positive way, when it not only shows the writer what is, so to speak, “wrong” with the paper, but when it also provides solutions to the paper's problems. The kind of modeling used as part of a directive tutoring session has an extremely high probability of becoming not a model but the actual corrective to a poor sentence, a fuzzy idea, a weak argument. “Here is a better way to write this sentence,” is ultimately a less helpful response than, “Tell me in other words what you were trying to say here.” “Here's what I [the tutor] have a problem understanding” is a more valuable approach than “This is what is wrong.”

Non-directive tutoring provides mod-

els also, but it provides them analogously; it allows for the writer to figure out—based on particular models—how, for example, a sentence might be written. Training in questioning techniques can help tutors respond to papers in such a way that the writer becomes actively engaged in talking about, thinking about and finding better ways to articulate his or her ideas. It places the writer and tutor in a more equitable relationship—that of writer and audience—than does directive tutoring in which the relationship is between writer and authority.

Non-directive tutoring is in many ways more difficult than directive tutoring. It involves sometimes leaving a writer without a sense of closure. It takes more time. It involves excellent tutor training. It means relinquishing some power. Anyone who is a parent knows how tempting, how satisfying, and how final “because I said so” is, but we also know that such an approach doesn't really teach anything much.

None of this is to say that there aren't some times when a word is just wrong, when a sentence is ungrammatical, when punctuation is misused. But far better to ask that the student consult the writing center dictionary to see if the word has the meaning he or she thinks it has than to supply a better choice. Similarly, consulting a handbook together with the tutor, or talking about why sentences are usually clearer when subject and verb are in reasonable proximity helps a writer to understand what non-tutor resources are available and to pay more attention to the building blocks of a paper than he or she might have previously done. And asking questions like “What did you mean here?” “How are these ideas connected?” “Why did you use that particular word in that sentence?” helps writers to develop an active model for approaching their own work.

Students come to the writing center for help. They come because they want answers—obviously. But giving them

the tools to understand what questions they need to ask, to find the resources to answer those questions, and to learn what it is that makes an effective piece of writing will provide them with more valuable skills than telling them what to do and how to do it. Directive tutoring fosters a dependence on the authority of the writing center staff. It shows writers that there is fixed, certain and correct information out there, and that the center's staff has it. It does not create writers who understand that writing is often fluid, that its effects will vary to some degree according to our audience, and that correctness is often in the eye of the reader. Non-directive tutoring does not preclude discussing some of the issues writers have to face, or examining questions about correctness. It simply makes the writer an equal partner in finding the answers.

What I am suggesting, then, is that there are two equally important considerations when we ask “who holds the pen” or—more significantly—“who owns the paper.” One is academic honesty. Papers must belong to the writers who write them. They must in all significant ways be the product of the mind of their author. Otherwise the tutor should receive the paper's grade and corollary academic credit. Moreover, if faculty suspect that the paper belongs to a tutor rather than the writer, our credibility on campus will be severely undermined. Directive tutoring has the potential to create problems with paper ownership that will directly affect concerns about academic honesty. Non-directive tutoring is less likely to do this.

But equally important is helping writers develop their own authority, their own writing abilities. And non-directive tutoring—by guiding writers, rather than directing them, by helping them to ask questions that they can learn to answer even without a tutor by their side—is not only empowering but also most directly supports our goal as educators—the development of independent and capable individuals who can use written language to articulate what it is they think.



# TUTORS' COLUMN

## Eight tips for the writing tutor

1. Make sure that you have a foundation of reasons for why you think that improving writing is essential. Education cannot be responsible for everything that is valuable. Education can only concentrate on subjects that are necessary for all students. You need to have a persuasive answer for students when they ask, "Why do I have to write?" If you can't convince a student that becoming a better writer is in his or her best interest, that student probably won't be back for next week's session.

2. Ask questions as often as possible! If a student asks something, try to turn it back to the student so the student answers his or her own question. That is the zenith of education: to produce people who can think through problems and come up with a solution on their own. I believe that students need to be engaged in the learning process. They need to construct their own idea of what good writing is. Sometimes they have no desire to figure out a solution on their own (most tutors have encountered the student who is only interested in the quick fix of his or her paper), but asking them questions, getting them to think, is for their own good, whether they realize that or not.

3. Tape one of your sessions with a student. Listen to it and assess your teaching for yourself. It is essential for you, if you want to improve, to find some way to objectively gauge how you are doing.

4. Give positive reinforcement. The

first words out of your mouth should be encouraging. Most of the students that you tutor have already convinced themselves that they are bad writers. Whether or not this is true, you need to find something specifically positive to say right away so you can begin building the student's self-confidence at the first impression. "It looks like you've put a lot of time into this paper!" is definitely better than "It looks like we've got our work cut out for us here," even though the latter may be true.

5. Do not lie to students, however. The key is to find specific examples of what you think is good and what you think could be improved upon. Here are a couple of lines that I frequently use when I need to cushion the critiquing of a student's writing:

"I know I'm being picky, but your writing is at the stage where it deserves to be picked at."

"We all learn from mistakes. I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't show you some spots that I think can be improved upon."

6. Process, not product. Think about how a sentence came into being as well as how it is written on the page. This is where you have to show your students that you truly care about them. You have to do more than fix the mistakes in a paper if you want to be a good tutor. You have to help your students develop a healthier approach to writing, and you have to show them their bad

habits and help them figure out how to avoid these bad habits in the future.

7. Thinking is closely related to writing. I have tutored many students that, as I said above, had convinced themselves that they were terrible writers. In particular, I remember one student who was certain that she was a hopelessly lost cause when it came to writing. She had many intelligent ideas, however, and I knew that she was not stupid. Her problem was that she did not have a lot of experience with writing down the ideas that were running around in her head. This is when I realized just how closely connected thinking and writing are. If a student has been thoughtful about a subject, then there is no reason why that student cannot write about that subject. With a little guidance and positive reinforcement, this student was able to write a fine paper because she knew the subject matter well.

8. Last, and certainly not least, never underestimate the power of what you say. You may say something to a student that, to you, just seems like another piece of advice, but that one bit of help may work wonders for that student. Conversely, establishing a rapport can be difficult in many cases, and you can easily destroy the trust that a student has invested in you. Moreover, it is too easy to talk down to a student without even realizing it. Therefore, remember that you are a teacher, and you can have a memorable impact on the lives of your students.

Harvey Venia  
Peer Tutor  
Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, MI

# The triangle of success in tutoring

## Writer's block

In preparing this essay, I sat down and began to write about a subject I'd half-heartedly selected after a lot of debating. I needed to produce a final paper—rather quickly, I might add—and there didn't seem to be a lot of fresh, new thoughts floating around in my head. I finally settled for a basic, mundane topic and began the familiar process of churning out yet another written work. However, about five paragraphs into it, I stopped, realizing that I simply had nothing more to say. I sat in front of the computer for a good ten minutes, praying that my writer's block was only temporary. Frustrated, I began reading over what I had already written, hoping that something would generate a new flow of ideas. As I came back to where I had left off, I realized that I couldn't finish the essay. I hated it. The subject was boring and overused, and my disinterest in it was quite apparent in my apathetic words.

I needed help, but I had always chosen to "tough it out" on my own when I ran into problems instead of seeking advice from a tutor. I didn't like dealing with the hassle of someone mentally grading my paper as a teacher did with red ink. Arrogant as it sounded, I truly believed I could help myself much more than any tutor ever could. Then I stopped myself—what was I thinking? Here I was, in desperate need of help with writing, and I was too proud to ask for it. And, ironically enough, the essay was supposed to be all about my internship in the writing lab as a tutor and how rewarding it was. Hmmm. Realizing how ignorant that sounded, I packed up my things and headed to the writing lab, this time as a student in need rather than someone helping a student in need.

Michelle, my tutor, promptly got to work on my dilemma, asking questions about my experience in the writing lab. As I described the fun I had working as a tutor, she could see I was very involved with and excited about the subject and asked, "How does what you're telling me fit in with what you've already written?" I realized that none of it fit in. Suddenly, I knew what I needed to write about. I had finally seen another side of the writing lab triangle, having now been both a tutor and student being tutored. I was fascinated by the relationships of the three sides of the triangle—the teacher, tutor, and student—to each other, and how the tutor acted as the "middle person" between the two other points, as Michelle had done.

## The mysterious middle-person

The handbook of the University of Missouri Writing Lab, citing Muriel Harris, defines a tutor as "(an) intermediary between students and their instructors," someone who acts as an "audience, listener, coach, or counselor" rather than a dictator (Hocks and O'Connor 6). However, many students still regard a writing lab tutor as an authority figure because it is expected that the tutor is quite proficient in the use of language, indicating a certain level of expertise. The tutor should be accomplished enough to offer intelligent suggestions during the course of the help session, but the tutor is, by no means, a genius in every field. Tutors are human too and can always find room for improvement. As students who visit the writing lab discover, the tutor acts mainly as a good reader and listener of a written work "because (tutors) are not experts in a particular student's field" and must gather a great deal of information about the assignment from what the student says and

writes (Hocks and O'Connor 6).

According to Muriel Harris' article, "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors": "Tutorial instruction is very different from traditional classroom learning because it introduces into the educational setting a middle person, the tutor, who inhabits a world somewhere between student and teacher" (27). The tutor is, essentially, the "middle man." Acting as a liaison between the language of sophistication and structure of the teacher and the more relaxed, casual style of the student, the tutor tries to relate to the best of both worlds. A contributing factor to the idea that a tutor communicates more appropriately with the needs of the student is that tutors speak to students in a less imposing language. Whereas the teacher of a class might explain what needs to be done with certain facts and figures, the tutor converses casually and asks questions to relate to the student's personality. In my situation, Michelle began the session talking about a subject I felt comfortable with—the writing lab—and was able to establish a good relationship with me quickly. This sort of talking during a help session is sometimes referred to as "exploratory language"—the idea of communicating and exploring new ideas to clarify the goals of one's paper or product. Use of exploratory language is highly effective, as it is "less controlled and controlling, (with) more power to generate confident assertions and make connections than . . . presentational language" (Harris 31).

Often, after a session of talking through a student's ideas and fears about an assignment, the tutor is able to guide an individual in a way that allows the student to find the answers to

his or her own questions, which often creates many new thoughts from those answers, as was the case with me. The role of a tutor is valuable because it encompasses such a large number of responsibilities—reading, listening, questioning, encouraging, and so on. Each session varies with the differing needs and goals of each individual student, but in general the tutor is “there to help reduce the stress, to overcome the hurdles, . . . and to know more about writing than a roommate or friend” (Harris 29). The tutor becomes like a very knowledgeable relative.

### As defined by students . . .

As I mentioned earlier, students still view tutors as authority figures, largely because writing lab tutors are often found in learning atmospheres that feel somewhat like classrooms. However, once the student begins to talk to the tutor, it usually becomes apparent that the tutor has no intention of acting as a superior in the relationship, but rather as a helper. I felt very comfortable with Michelle, largely because she treated me as an equal. She may have been more knowledgeable about the rules of language in general, but was completely inexperienced with my specific needs. Therefore, a comfortable rapport was established between Michelle and me once we realized we were both there to assist each other in some way.

As soon as a student is able to feel comfortable with the idea that the tutor is there as a helper and non-threatening audience, he or she responds more openly. This reaction differs from the student’s reaction to a teacher’s comments in that students are much more open with their tutors, something that has been noticed by tutors-turned-teachers. It seems that, once “students realize that they don’t have to listen passively and accept what is ‘told’ to them by an authoritative speaker,” they are more honest about their true ideas and problems with their papers (Harris 28). If students are initially intimidated by the role of a tutor, this hesitation is usually replaced by an understanding

that the writing lab atmosphere is one that promotes healthy learning and growing, once the student sees that the tutor poses no threat to the student’s pride or grade.

### Examining the teacher-tutor-student triangle

The roles of teacher, tutor, and student are very distinct, yet they become an integral part of each other in the learning and writing process. The teacher delivers the assignment. The student doesn’t comprehend the assignment, so she goes to a writing lab tutor for help. The tutor must interpret what the teacher wants out of the assignment and then relate it to the student in a way that she can understand. A network of ideas and interpretations is formed through the intersection of these three parts that create, enhance, and evaluate the learning process.

### The teacher-student relationship

Although the role of a teacher is undoubtedly one of the key elements in the learning of writing, this role can also impose certain restrictions on an open and honest teacher-student relationship. Because the teacher is the one giving the grades and making corrections, the student often finds it difficult to share his or her honest opinions about problems with an assignment. Peter Elbow, author of *Writing with Power*, considers two basic audiences a student can have when creating a work—“dangerous” and “safe” (186). The dangerous audience results in an individual finding it difficult to communicate easily. The teacher often acts as a dangerous audience, as students worried about their grades have trouble coming up with something to please the teacher. This inability to communicate effectively is one of the frequent problems students have when they come into the writing lab, because they have a basic idea of what the assignment is and they know what they want to write about, but have trouble putting the teacher’s expectations together with their individual ideas.

The relationship between teacher and student is sometimes divided into the roles of “teacher as teacher” and “student as student” (Harris 37). Often, the students are expected to follow the examples given to them by their teachers, creating a sort of leader-follower relationship that does not allow much room for conversing as equals. Therefore, students rarely feel comfortable sharing anything with the teacher for fear of sounding and appearing extremely inferior. I suppose this fear was in the back of my mind as I sat before the computer, determined to come up with an essay that would appear professional to my teacher and others who would read it.

Another hang-up occurs with “students’ difficulties in understanding teacher comments.” This problem may be due, in part, to a difference in vocabulary, as well as the possibility of a student misinterpreting a teacher’s comments. If a student is unsure about the impressions he or she is making on the teacher, the student is likely to make false assumptions about feelings the teacher may not necessarily have. Many times, these assumptions create feelings of insecurity in the student, making him or her less likely to feel confident about writing and sharing ideas in a paper. An easy, conversational relationship between teacher and student makes the student more comfortable, creating a more positive learning atmosphere.

### The tutor-student slant

However, sometimes students are not fortunate enough to “click” with their teachers’ personalities, perhaps due to differing views, or simply because the class is too large for every student to receive individual attention. The comfortable, ideological relationship disappears as the students hesitate to share their deepest thoughts and feelings with virtual strangers. It is here that the role of the tutor has significant importance. As Harris explains, “teachers get information about students from conferences and from students’ contributions to classroom interaction, much of

what's needed comes from the written products students turn in. And those products are often analyzed when the teachers are sitting alone at their desks, away from the students. By contrast, in the interaction between tutor and student, the tutor picks up clues from watching and listening to the student." Harris continues: "Because the tutor sits below the teacher on the academic ladder, the tutor can work effectively with students in ways that teachers can not." (28). Many tutoring experts feel that the tutor can often be more effective than a teacher in helping a student during the writing process because the tutor doesn't pose a large threat to the student. During my time with Michelle, I felt less anxious knowing that she was not going to grade me, yet she could give me pointers similar to those of a teacher, while helping me improve and building my confidence.

The anxiety produced from a writing assignment can lead to the student's doubting his or her work. A student often questions whether a paper meets the teacher's assignment. As a tutor, I have seen this fear of not doing what the teacher wants reflected in the eyes of many a student. Through the tutoring process, the writer is able to gain confidence as he or she is positively reinforced with comments from the tutor. What may have begun as an "anxiety-producing" situation has become a more comfortable learning atmosphere, with the tutor as the facilitator and the student as the "thinker." Positive reinforcement and good communication are the keys to success in the tutor-student relationship. A student is much more likely to open up to a tutor when she feels comfortable with that person. And when the student feels more able to express herself, she is more likely to be a productive thinker and writer. One of the benefits of discussing ideas about a paper with a tutor is that the tutor is usually able to relate to the level on which the student is thinking, whereas a teacher may not be able to see the student's viewpoint. The same is also true of the reversed situation.

Students sometimes feel that a tutor can interpret "teacher language by translating it into their own language, that is, give meaning to terms they had heard and read and not understood" (Harris 36).

### **Perceptions of the tutor-student relationship**

Students' comments about tutors commonly say the same thing: "tutors work with them in ways that enable and encourage independent thinking and that help them see how to put their theoretical knowledge into practice as they write" (Harris 40). The bottom line is, students like to feel intelligent. I speak from experience. I liked the fact that Michelle did not tell me what to think or write during our session, but instead guided me with questions and positive comments until I came up with the ideas myself. Although at first, I may have wanted someone to simply fix the grammar errors and correct what was wrong with my paper, in the long run, I'd rather learn how to do it to prepare myself for the next time I had an assignment. Tutors don't give answers—they ask questions that guide the students into answering the questions themselves. By explaining the assignments given by the teachers in words more understandable to students, the tutor is able to make the student think for himself and, thus, learn how to better interpret the assignments from the teacher.

However, where the situation becomes complicated is in the differences that arise among students. Different students have different strengths and weaknesses, and it is up to the tutor to fit each tutoring session to the needs of the individual. For me, it was a matter of coming up with a subject that excited me. Another problem is created when the student—like myself, at one time—is unwilling to see that he or she may be in need of a second opinion. These confident attitudes about writing can sometimes be attributed to the kinds of classes a student is taking. I decided to evaluate three different types of students in order to reach

some sort of solution as to which kinds of students are more prone to use the writing lab and which ones are more likely to shy away from it. The results were as follows:

### **Honors students**

The first group I chose was the honors crowd. I was curious to see how many of them were like I once was, doubting a second opinion could be any better than their own. John had never been to the writing lab. When asked why, he replied that he liked to work on his own. In fact, he said that if someone suggested that he try the writing lab, he "might be a little insulted. I'd like to be able to think I could do it on my own. I wouldn't want to be dependent on anyone else." Then again, John is only a freshman. Perhaps in due time, he will come to rely on expertise outside his realm.

### **Journalism students**

I questioned journalism students next, expecting some interesting answers. I figured they must like to write if they're planning on doing it for a profession, yet the style most journalists are used to is much different than that of standard composition form. Journalists are taught to say what they have to say as briefly as possible, and are reprimanded for using words and sentences that are too long. I wondered whether these people, trained to write for a living, had trouble at all. "Actually," journalism student Rebecca shared, "it's not that I have trouble writing. It's that when I'm expected to switch from short, news writing to long essays and papers, I find it hard to make the transition." Rebecca goes to the writing lab for help with her longer compositions to make sure the sentences are more elaborate. I have to admit that I was surprised by the fact that journalists went to writing labs. I thought I had them pegged as the most confident people of the bunch, but I am pleasantly surprised that I was wrong.

### **Stretch English 20 students**

Stretch English 20 is an English class offered at the University of Missouri

specifically designed to help students who are not as strong as others in English. Some of these students are foreign, while others simply need more help enhancing their writing skills. Stretch English 20 is structured so that each student gets the benefit of a large classroom setting, where the teacher teaches and distributes assignments. However, this class is unique in that it also provides a smaller discussion group with a sort of tutor, in which the students discuss the assignments at hand and how to approach them. Darren is a student in the Stretch 20 class, and he prefers the small group setting, using the tutor: "(My tutor) and I are better friends (than my teacher and I). With her, I could probably say everything that was bad about my essay." This sounded like what Harris had been talking about earlier,

the idea that students often feel more comfortable telling their tutors about problems with their papers because the tutor does not pose a threat to their grades. When asked if he would share his concerns about his paper with his teacher, Darren replied, "If (the teacher's) marking it, I don't want to tell her everything that's wrong with it."

In all, most students I asked said that they would rather use the writing lab and the resources offered by the tutors than not. However, a great many students still seem to shy away from the tutoring experience, largely because they are not sure what to expect. Once they are there and can see that the tutoring process is quite harmless and relatively simple, the students are more likely to return. In fact, once it was ex-

plained to John some of what goes on in the writing lab, he even considered the idea: "I might go—I could see myself doing it. If I knew what they did there and that they could help me, I'd be more prone to go."

### Utilizing the magical middle-person

The tutoring experience is one that has proven to be a beneficial supplement to the classes in which the writing projects are assigned. Some of the most positive aspects include the fact that "students feel free from the classroom constraint of having to listen to the teacher and to do as they are told" (Harris 31). Therefore, the students are placed in situations that enhance their natural abilities and help them learn new strategies to use for future reference. In addition to learning new ways to write, students are positively reinforced to build their confidence about

## NWCA News from Joan Mullin, President

Hope to see you at CCCC! I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we'll get to see our fine friends and engage in professional renewal at the upcoming CCCC. So the good news includes the Friday night Writing Center SIG "Responsible Practice in the Writing Center: Tutoring in the Center, in the Disciplines, and in Cyberspace," chaired by our NWCA first vice president, Al DeCiccio (6:00 p.m.). This is followed by our general meeting (usually from about 7:00-7:45) for which this column invites your opinion—whether you're attending the C's or not. The bad news is that our SIG cuts into dinner hour and a CCCC sponsored wine tasting . . . .

Since we folk have to be incurably optimistic (or we don't last long), I'm hoping our discussion of these issues prior to the C's will move us through the meeting efficiently. Two issues need the most input from the membership:

1. What can/should NWCA do for you?
2. How should we create, promote, structure and assess our own

accrediting/assessment/evaluation team?

1. We're up-dating and revising the starter packet, and we'll have a report on that at the C's. We also plan to more actively promote and notify you about writing center publications and featured workshops at conferences like NCTE and the C's. What else should the national be doing to help the regionals? What can we do to help new centers as well as veteran ones? Any ideas?

2. For two years we've had a committee looking into the creation of an accrediting team for writing centers. A lot of discussion of this idea has also taken place on WCenter. Perhaps the one thing everyone agreed on was that we don't want to evolve a system or team that applies one template or formula to all centers. This is why the term "accrediting" has come under fire. Yet most of us like the idea of having a team that could come to campus and review our program, pointing out its strengths and areas for improvement—given the context of that writ-

sessions feeling more positive, more in control of their own writing" (Harris 30). While these assessments do have an administrative purpose, the possibilities of the writing lab for various reasons, many students are reaping the benefits of the quality discussion and program review that would have written labs as a viable report program review on the horizon. As such, the writing team at the University of Missouri-Columbia is on a campus which may not know how to evaluate a writing center. How should it be completed? Regionally? By state? Nationally? New York Online URL 1984. Harris, Mueis. "Thinking in the Middle: The Writing Center and Writing Tutor." *College English* 157 (1995): 271-282. Can we keep such a team? How can we rank it? (E.g., Most fear administrative risks such as the writing center. "The Writing Center: A Writing Lab" *Longhorn University of Missouri*, 1994. How can we educate our community as well as provide a fair assessment of its services?

You can either e-mail your wisdom to me (jmullin@uoft02.utoledo.edu), fax (419-530-4752), or send a note (Joan Mullin, Writing Center, University of Toledo, 2801 W. Bancroft, Toledo, Ohio 43606-3390) by March 7. The more we get done before the SIG, the

# WRITING CENTER ETHICS

## Discerning and discriminating among multiple contexts

As I indicated in my last column, talking about ethics in the context of a writing center environment is not a simple matter, largely because the contexts which affect and influence writing centers are complex and multilayered. Writing centers exist in multiple domains—administrative, pedagogical, spatial, emotional—and each of these domains, as far as we are able to make discriminations among them, are affected by a broad range of variables. When we talk about the ethics of tutorial conferences, for example, our ability to do so often depends upon the administrative policies we have established, the regulations imposed by our particular campuses, the tutorial styles of individual tutors, the types of papers being written, and the editorial and affective stances of the students we deal with. This is the lesson of situational ethics.

But how, exactly, are we to identify the specific features of particular “situations” when making ethical decisions? How do we discriminate, theoretically, among the many contexts that interpenetrate one another in writing centers, and how are we to determine their general influence on a writing center’s ethics? Creating a taxonomy that labels and categorizes contexts is perhaps the simplest and most direct way to proceed, but there are clear problems inherent in taking such an approach. Postmodern epistemologies (and just plain common sense) tell us that any such taxonomizing is bound to be arbitrary and reductive, a reflection of one person’s perspective rather than a full and accurate representation of

the activities that take place in the system as a whole. This would certainly be the case with a taxonomic model of writing center contexts. Still, it is hard to deny that even partial models have important uses, not the least of which is their value as “targets to shoot at” (as Linda Flower once wrote about her own cognitive writing process model).

That said, I offer the following set of contexts for me to write about and for you to shoot at, contexts which seem—to me—to play some significant role in the construction of a writing center’s ethics. I make no claim to comprehensiveness in the number of contexts listed here; I suspect that many of you will be able to identify important aspects of writing center practice that I have managed to overlook. Over the next few columns, I’ll look at each of the categories in this list and reflect on some of the ways in which I think they affect us and our ethics.

### Ethical Frameworks Central to Writing Center Operations

- Administrative Context: General
- Administrative Context: Daily Operations
- Administrative Context: Tutors
- Pedagogical Context: Personal Philosophies and Principles of Pedagogy
- Tutorial Context: Tutor Authority and Directiveness
- Tutorial Context: Student Expectations
- Tutorial Context: Student Personalities
- Tutorial Context: Student/Faculty Relations
- Tutorial Context: Demographic

### Groups and Special Needs

#### Administrative Context: General

Writing centers exist within an institutional context. The context we are most familiar with, of course, is educational: writing centers established in schools of one sort or another to help students with the writing they are required to produce for their classes. But it is possible to envision “writing centers” that exist in other contexts as well: in businesses, in governmental organizations, in volunteer programs, in community outreach programs, even in a consortium of “home schools” which operate more or less independently. Writing centers—as places where tutors (or the equivalent) interact with writers (independently or institutionally motivated) about their texts—can be configured in a variety of ways, each configuration raising different kinds of ethical questions and influencing decisions about what comprises ethical response. So the first, and perhaps one of the most important contexts we can identify for writing centers is the *Institutional Site* within which they are located. In addition to the possible sites already mentioned above, the more conventional (traditional? typical?) academic locales would include elementary schools, junior high schools, high schools, technical/professional schools, two-year colleges, four-year colleges, and universities. These educational sites might be in public or private institutions, with corresponding differences in their obligations to state agencies and regulations and corresponding variations in the pressures they feel to

construct their ethics in certain ways. In more regional terms, the demographics of the student community also comprise significant features of the institutional site, features that determine the kind of educational background students are likely to have, the cultural and ethnic makeup of the student body, the particular needs that a writing center will have to address, and the ethics that writing centers must construct in order to satisfy the special requirements of their student clientele.

A related issue is the *Institutional Positioning* writing centers have within their institutional site, as this can often have profound consequences for the center's (and director's) autonomy and power to determine its own ethics. Institutional positioning determines how writing centers are funded and to whom they must report, and the specifics of this arrangement can affect the ethics that are proposed and upheld by writing center personnel. If, for example, the academic officer who controls writing center funding—a department head, a dean, a provost, a president, or some other administrative functionary—disagrees with the way a particular situation was handled, then that officer's power to control and regulate funding gives him/her a disproportionate ability to regulate writing center policies. Writing centers are all-too-often academic beggars, much more so than other departments and service providers on campuses (Amato; Sherwood). They many times operate on shoestring budgets with far fewer staff than they need to satisfy the demands on their services, and they are generally dependent upon the goodwill of their superiors in the institutional hierarchy for their continual (and annually-renewable) funding. Though most administrators on most campuses tend to recognize the value of their writing centers and are usually reluctant to micromanage the daily ethical problems that are within the domain of

writing center directors, most directors are very conscious of their tenuous status in the larger framework of the high school, college, or university, and may be less than willing to make ethical, responsible policy decisions that might conflict with the agendas of people higher up. As Diana George and Nancy Grimm note,

In our own center, the growth has been so rapid that, in less than a year, the director has found herself being called on to report upwards to approximately fifteen people.

These include the Department Head, the Director of First-year English, the Dean of Sciences and Arts, the Dean of Special Academic Programs, the Dean of Engineering, the Dean of Students, the Vice-President of Student Services, the Provost, the head of the Mathematics Department, two social science professors, and four faculty members involved in writing-in-the-disciplines. Granted, this list is a long one even for the most ambitious writing center director, but it is indicative of the centrality of learning centers in the university environment today. If the writing center director does not pay attention to the line of command, one of those many vice-presidents or heads or faculty people could do immense damage to programmatic changes. (63)

Imagine, just as a relatively simple and harmless example of these institutional pressures, if you—as the director of a writing center at a small private college—have a problem with a student who is argumentative in conferences with your tutors, who regularly demands that tutors proofread his paper for errors, and who tries to make more appointments for help than your policies allow. After repeated complaints from tutors about this student's behavior, you talk to him briefly the next time he comes in, explaining carefully, yet firmly, the center's policies

on appointments, proofreading, and student behavior. You tell him that his combative attitude is unproductive and uncalled for, and any further complaints from tutors will lead you to ban him from the center. The next day, you get a call from your department head advising you that the student's father called with an angry complaint about the way you treated his son. The father, says the head, is a major donor to the department and the college and has threatened to make a substantial cut in his annual contribution unless his son is treated with more respect. The department head strongly suggests that you give this student special consideration in the writing center, and she further hints that any reduction in this donor's donations to the department will be reflected in your future operating budget.

What would you do in a situation like this? Acquiesce? Stand firm? Negotiate? What is the ethical thing to do given your responsibilities to your department, your tutors, your students, and yourself?

Michael A. Pemberton  
University of Illinois, Urbana-  
Champaign

#### Works Cited:

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- George, Diana and Nancy Grimm. "Expanded Roles/Expanded Responsibilities: The Changing Nature of Writing Centers Today." *Writing Center Journal* 11.1 (Fall/Winter 1990): 59-66.
- Sherwood, Steve. "How to Survive the Hard Times." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 17.10 (June 1993): 4-8.

## Calendar for Writing Center Associations

Feb. 28: Northern California Writing Centers Assn., 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 Assn., in Providence, RI  
Contact: Meg Carroll, Writing Center, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI 02908. E-mail: mcarroll@grog.ric.edu

March 21: CUNY Writing Centers Assn., in Brooklyn, NY  
Contact: Gretchen Haynes, Writing Center, Library 318, Queensborough Community College, Bayside, NY 11364-1497. Fax: 718-428-0802; phone: 718-281-5001.

April 3-5: Texas Assn. of Writing Centers, in South Padre, TX

Contact: Lady Falls Brown, 213 Dept. of English, Texas Tech U., Lubbock, TX 79409-3091; e-mail: ykflb@ttacs.ttu.edu

April 10-12: South Central Writing Centers Assn., in Baton Rouge, LA

Contact: Judith G. Caprio: phone: 504-388-4077; e-mail: jcaprio@unix1.sncc.lsu.edu

April 11: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Assn., in Bloomsburg, PA

Contact: Terry Riley, Dept. of English, Bloomsburg U., Bloomsburg, PA 17815. Phone: 717-389-4736; e-mail: triley@bloomu.edu

April 18-19: East Central Writing Centers Assn., 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

April 18-20: Southeastern Writing Center Assn., 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

Sept. 17-20: National Writing Centers Assn./Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Assn., in Park City, UT  
Contact: Penny C. Bird, English Dept., Brigham Young U., Box 26280, Provo, UT 84602-6280. Fax: 801-378-4720; phone: 801-378-5471; e-mail: penny\_bird@byu.edu

THE WRITING LAB  
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Muriel Harris, editor  
Department of English  
Purdue University  
1356 Heavilon Hall  
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