

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R
Volume 22, Number 9 Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing May, 1998

...FROM THE EDITOR...

Several months ago, I was pleased to note that the newsletter for that month (January, 1998) included an article considering the relationship between directors and tutors—a perspective we don't explore sufficiently. In this month's issue, Kelly Lowe introduces us to a cybernetic model of writing lab administration that emphasizes communication with and feedback from tutors. And, as part of that communication and feedback, our lead article in this month's issue is the voice of a peer tutor exploring the metaphor of midwifery to examine the tutor's role in a tutorial.

Also in this issue, you'll find announcements about new NWCA Press books, NCTE books, and forthcoming conferences. In the next issue of the newsletter, I hope to have more information about the next NWCA conference, April 15-18, 1999, in Bloomington, Indiana. The next issue of the newsletter, for June, is the last of this academic year and this volume, and we will resume publication in September. If there are any conference announcements that should be in the June issue, please e-mail, phone, or send a really fast carrier pigeon note to me by May 10th, at the latest. (See the boxed information on page 2 for addresses.)

-Muriel Harris, editor

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Midwifery in the writing center

Translating writing center theories about collaborative techniques into practice seemed difficult when I first started training as a peer consultant at Seattle University's Writing Center. I tended to assume the stance of an expert, but readings in theory overwhelmingly described such a stance as ineffective and outdated. My first clients, on the other hand, seemed to prefer what theorists shun. Since then I have learned that the willingness of many writers to hand their work over to an expert, which complicates collaborative intentions, springs from a common root problem of doubting their own abilities. As I read up on collaboration theories to alleviate this core problem of doubt that my expert stance only compounded, I encountered another obstacle: partly because many theorists react to negative models, I had difficulty adapting them to my work consulting. The two fears in collaboration that I detected among writing center theorists basically fall along the lines of general gender stereotypes of overly authoritative behavior and extreme nurturing behavior. Both types of theories illustrate how to collaborate through discussion of what a consultant should not do. Coming up with a positive model that incorporates

this balance and resonates on a deeper level than abstract theory or practical directives, that is both clear enough to follow but flexible enough to promote consultant spontaneity and individuality, became my goal. Such a positive model naturally surfaced through metaphor, for a metaphorical image can reverberate deeply within us, instilling a strong, often practical sense of what before remained only a vague idea.

Midwifery answers this call. The metaphor of midwifery functions

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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.

within the larger cultural perception of writing as a birthing process. Even business memos and science reports involve creative genesis on some level: as writers we create a voice, we create ideas through characters on a page, and ultimately we create ourselves. Consultants have a role in this birthing process, but it is certainly not as the mother-writer. The baby is not ours. We choose either to act as physicians or as midwives in our consulting. As the following demonstrates, the physician metaphor communicates much of what is not collaboration. On the other hand, midwifery provides a concrete, life-affirming image that brings together many aspects of what good collaboration in the writing center is all about.

Midwifery is by no means new as a metaphor for teaching and tutoring. We see it applied to college-level teaching as a break from traditional models in *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. In *Embracing Contraries* Peter Elbow touches on the "midwife teacher" in "the believing game" as "the teacher who can listen to a discussion or read a paper and sniff out every good idea that comes along, no matter how poorly understood or badly expressed it is" (286). Patrick D. Murphy extends the cross-cultural midwife metaphor through combining it with Native American imagery of the trickster coyote; he uses these two images to guide feminist literature teachers in "Coyote Midwife in the Classroom: Introducing Literature with Feminist Dialogics." Donna Fonanarose Rabuck applies midwifery to professional writing consultants working with ethnic minorities in "Giving Birth to Voice: The Professional Writing Tutor as Midwife." All these works promote awareness of the different power dynamic achieved through the midwife metaphor. Applying midwifery to the situation of all consultants and writers extends the metaphor still further.

For the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing*, "banking education" describes the traditional form of teaching where teachers treat students as vessels to be deposited in with little return. Banker teachers do not reconcile or even pay attention to the knowledge and diversity students bring into the classroom. Holding up a standard of truth, they do not draw on student knowledge or critical skills to help students discover knowledge on their own. In many ways, as the authors themselves imply, "banking education" and traditional physician practices draw from the same basic attitude.

"Banking education anesthetizes; . . . it attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness." When anesthesia is administered to a woman in childbirth, the woman becomes, as McMillan says, "a passive spectator" of the birth of her child. She cannot participate actively because she cannot feel the contractions in her uterus. The physician "usurps the woman's natural role during childbirth as *he* now 'gives birth' to the baby with the aid of an array of technological devices." Midwife-teachers do not administer anesthesia. They support their students' thinking, but they do not do the students' thinking for them or expect the students to think as they do (217-8).

The typical practices of physicians and midwives in delivering a baby point to implied attitudes that can transform our views of the writing consultant's role. An eagerness to intervene with drugs, surgery, and unnecessary procedures communicates to the mother that she is weak and is dependent on the physician. Physicians usually require the mother to deliver in "the worst, most ineffective and most dangerous position" for "the convenience of the doctor" (Boston 373).

Consultants assuming the expert role work in a similar manner with clients, who then leave them with the words, "I could not have done this without you." Sometimes consultants do this because

they believe it will create a better paper, because the client wants someone else to take an expert stance, or simply for the convenience or ego of the consultant. Such clients often do not resist because they fear the pain of laboring over a paper.

Alternatively, a midwife centers childbirth around the mother's needs. "We're guests in their life, not the center," Marijke van Roojen, a licensed midwife and Assistant Director of the Midwifery Program at Seattle Midwifery School, told me in an interview. The midwife can acknowledge individuality and be more spontaneous, allowing choices in positions and listening to how the mother wants to give birth, stressing the client's active role in the process. The mother moves her body herself while the midwife supports and nurtures the mother and acts as unobtrusively as possible. As van Roojen pointed out, the goal is to "facilitate a process rather than direct or do." Mothers who employ midwives take charge of their lives despite their fears. As a midwife, van Roojen would never presume to "know what the mother needs and wants"; as she put it, "we don't deliver; we catch." In the end, the midwife's client feels strong and capable because she delivered her baby herself.

To apply midwifery as a metaphor to writing consulting seems natural. It involves an attitude that at its base has everything to do with good collaboration in the writing center. A consultant's fear about balancing traditional gendered behavior in collaboration dissolves before this metaphor. The midwife incorporates challenge and praise by encouraging the mother to rise to the challenge that the birth process itself poses. Awareness of this mollifies doubts about collaboration, such as the possibility of too much emphasis on praise that is posited in Terri A. Hasseler's "Balancing Tenderness and Threat: 'Respect' as Intellectual Disagreement in the Writing Center." The midwife metaphor also alleviates An-

drea Lunsford's warnings against the typically masculine hierarchical dynamics in "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center." Arguing that criticism and challenge can be forms of respect, Hasseler advises against overemphasizing tenderness in, for instance, a consultant who unquestioningly accepts writing. Viewing consulting as midwifery refocuses collaboration as not simply tenderness. It makes it easier to find balance in collaboration by seeing that an environment that feels safe does not have to forbid challenge and correction as useful techniques in a paper's birthing.

Lunsford voices a fear opposite to Hasseler's in collaboration. She cautions against "rushing to embrace collaboration because collaboration can also be used to reproduce the status quo" (39-40), which can occur when "the tutor is still the seat of all authority but is simply pretending it isn't so" and thus ignoring differences by watering "down ideas to the lowest common denominator" (40). She basically warns against a physician attitude in disguise. This consultant who pretends to collaborate still holds a view of knowledge as finite, overlooking complexity and what the writer intends to express. The midwife metaphor resolves this through listening to individual needs and wants and centering the process around the writer. As midwife-consultants, we work to understand the writer, not the other way around. We do this not through blind acceptance, which might be seen as stereotypically feminine, nor through decreeing what the paper should say, which might be seen as stereotypically masculine, but rather through listening, questioning, informing, and encouraging. The successful midwife-consultant thus negotiates a collaborative power dynamic that respects both the consultant's experience and the writer's ownership of the ideas and process.

This metaphor also teaches consultants how to handle diversity in the writing center. Because the midwife

accommodates the preferences of each individual, Rabuck naturally uses the metaphor to tutor ethnic minorities. Diversity challenges consultants because we must, as Murphy states, pass "through the fear and discomfort that come with one's sense of self being challenged" (163). We undergo a strong, often unconscious temptation to assert our own identity in the face of what is different. Sometimes we cannot even detect the difference because our imaginations are quick to categorize concepts among knowledge we already have, reshaping it to conform to previous experience. The midwife-consultant respects differences due to everything from culture to socio-economic class, staying alert to the each client's needs, voice, and ideas.

Beyond its significance for individual practice, midwifery, in refining our image of consulting, alters our vision of the writing center as a whole. As Libby Falk Jones points out in "New Metaphors for the Writing Center" in the January 1996 *Writing Lab Newsletter*, "If we believe the writing center is a prison, madhouse, or hospital . . . then we will act in ways which transform that metaphor into reality" (6). Seeing the writing center as a hospital with physicians means clients suffer illnesses and need cures. Midwifery, on the other hand, approaches birth not as another illness, but as a natural life process. Instead of taking the mother's pain away, the midwife teaches her to breathe into and thus deal with the pain so she can feel the full reward of giving birth. Following suit, the midwife-consultant reconciles the tension between praising and directing by encouraging and guiding writers through the often painful process of writing. All this occurs in a place comfortable to the mother-writer, so the center should be a comfortable, appealing place. Just as a mother would probably choose to birth at home, the client who comes to a midwife-consultant ideally comes to a relaxing space for the exciting process of birthing a paper.

Imaging my work as a consultant in this way allowed me to let go of many expert tendencies and to relax. Physician-consultants suffer any ill consequences of a paper written under their supervision, but midwife-consultants who do not assume the responsibility for others' papers have no concern except for writers' improvement—no need for malpractice insurance.

Through my battles with perfectionist tendencies, this has been a reassuring aspect of the metaphor: I do not need to give perfect guidance because the ideas, images, and voice of a client's paper are not mine and ought not be mine. My job is simply to help them bring out their own creativity; sometimes when I am successful in helping clients find their own words, through challenging and praising them, their developing sense of self-assurance rewards me. In aspiring to this ideal, I come closer to acknowledging in practice what Steve Sherwood terms the "messy give and take between tutors . . . and students" (54) and also to appreciating the fear, beauty, pain, humor, and spontaneity inevitable in the meeting of consultant, writer, and paper. I value this meeting more than I did in my expert mode, seeing now how it offers non-anesthetized communication, often all too rare in our daily lives. Through this image I find a positive model for ownership and power dynamics in consultant collaboration that, most importantly, affirms the writer's and consultant's activities as intimately connected to the creation of meaning and communication—ultimately, the midwife metaphor energizes us by re-connecting the writing center to what is essential in life.

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NWCA News

(cont. from page 15)

make accreditation work for NWCA, but we will need your wisdom, assistance, and general goodwill. Please write or email me with your responses to this issue.

I can tell you, finally, that the many activities writing center workers shared together—from the breakfast Jo Tavers organized to the Cubs Opening Day (Harry Caray Day) that Eric Hobson organized to all of the informal gatherings in between—demonstrated to me what has always been rather obvious: while we are an intellectually active group, we are also a social and caring community and we thoroughly enjoy one another. With over 400 paid members in NWCA and with nearly 1,000 subscribers to both *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal*, we are a thriving community as well.

Accept my best wishes as you finish your terms; to those of you whom I met in Chicago or with whom I renewed acquaintances, I miss you all already.

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The cybernetic writing center

It is not overly bold to state that the application of the concepts and approach of systems and cybernetics is likely to improve one's understanding of any situation that is overburdened with contradictions

-V.L. Parsegian, *This Cybernetic World of Men Machines and Earth Systems*

In *Postmodern Education*, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux argue that “administrators . . . need to rethink their roles as public intellectuals, and in doing so must reject the cult of knowledge, expertise, and disembodied rationality that permeates the discourse of curriculum theory” (89). The writing center director, who has an often tenuous, quasi-administrative position rife with conflicting demands (indeed, as more and more center directors become tenure-line faculty members, they find they have teaching, scholarship, and service responsibilities beyond those of directing a writing center), can find herself in the position to redefine what it means to be an academic administrator. In this essay I would like to explore an idea I’ve had for some time: applying the idea of a cybernetic system to the administration of the writing center.

Why cybernetics? Why not “common sense?” Indeed, one of the reasons I was originally drawn to cybernetics is that I was (at the time) working on a piece about the feasibility of a postmodern administrative model. Cybernetics, with its emphasis upon systems/matrices, feedback, and loops (instead of the hierarchical organization so typical in the American business management models), seemed to be a natural fit.

In this essay I propose a new way of looking at administration (and administering), a *cybernetic* form of center administration. In this model, the writing center director (WCD) works as both a problem *solver* and problem

causer, not a messiah or despot. In other words, the responsibility of a good center director “is to keep the [writing center] in proper balance, and not to ‘run’ it” (Birnbaum 204). There is both science and art in the administration of a writing center. Roger Birnbaum, in *How Colleges Work: The Cybernetics of Academic Organization and Leadership*, theorizes that

As an art, administration is informed by sensibilities, connoisseurship, and intuition. The administrator as artist tries to create new realities and to influence others as they enact their environment. (209)

A cybernetic administrator “is not an appendage sitting atop the organization but an integral part of a complex network within it” (225). This administrator is not a despot, nor is she a figurehead. The cybernetic program director should not seek “to achieve the greatest degree of control and influence for administrative process but rather . . . ensure that at least the minimal levels of structure, information flow, and decision-making capability are sustained” (236). With an emphasis upon consensus building, collaboration, and stratification, the cybernetic center director can work with the program (as opposed to against it, which so often seems to happen with a bureaucratic/despotic form of leadership).

Administrators “should complicate themselves by learning to look at their institutions using multiple rather than single frames” (209). The college or university itself is a multiplicity of do-

main or matrices, a living organism in fact, which is bound together by slender threads always ready to break. Perhaps the most frustrating thing about being a center director is having to deal with the multiple pathways of information—department chairs, deans, committees, students (both tutors and tutees), the board of trustees, and parents, all of whom have something they want out of the writing center. An obsession with “pleasing” all of the various constituencies can often leave an administrator with no real focus or role, except perhaps for that of firefighter, dashing from one mini-emergency to the next with no clear chance to look at the big picture.

One interesting and exciting aspect of a cybernetic form of administration is its emphasis upon the two-way flow of information. Cybernetics, as defined by Norbert Wiener, is “the science of control and communication, in the animal and the machine” (Ashby 1); or one I like better, “the art of the pilot or steersman [sic]” (Wiener 9). I would suggest that while perhaps an administrator doesn’t want to talk too much about his or her workers as animals or machines, the cybernetic emphasis on communication and its relationship with control, is important. Because, despite the difficulty with the concept of “control,” especially in a fluid academic system, if your writing center (or program or department or class) gets out of control (however you may choose to define it, or have it defined for you), the center director is the person who will suffer for that lack of control—whether through loss of job,

or reassignment, or bad tenure review, or just a tense meeting with a bunch of people in black suits. To borrow another definition from Wiener, "Control . . . is nothing but the sending of messages which effectively change the behavior of the recipient" (8).

While there are many areas in which cybernetics can be helpful to a center director, the following "formula" (for lack of a better metaphor) is, in my opinion, the essence of a cybernetic system: A cybernetic writing center emphasizes the *interaction* of organisms with an *environment*, contains an element of *purpose* or *objective*, has several *control principles* which are specifically addressed to the purpose/objective, features multiple lines of *feedback*, which are related specifically to the interactions, and finally, has a mechanism whereby the feedback gets specifically used to modify any initial acts (Parsegian 1-3).

Many of the problems that writing center directors encounter can be avoided with the creation of a cybernetic environment (for purposes of my discussion, I'm calling the writing center the environment, and the tutors, teachers, administrators and students the organisms). The environment that I have attempted to create at my school features two important cybernetic concepts: the idea of an extensive strategic planning stage, and the allowance for multiple pathways for feedback. By planning stage, I do not mean that one has to plan/build a writing center from scratch each year. Very few of us have this sort of luxury; in fact, most writing center directors I know have several institutionally-imposed guidelines by which they have to work: budgets, facilities, and tutors (especially if you pay those tutors) are almost always the result of annual, torturous, discussions with a wide variety of individuals. Further, most of us spend our summers, by choice or fiat, doing something other than worrying about the writing center. Therefore, by "planning stage," I mean

the integration of numerous decision-making subsystems . . . which involves (1) the establishment of goals, objectives, policies, procedures, and organizational relationships on a systematic basis for guidance of decision making and planning at various organizational levels, and (2) the provision for the flow of information to and from these planning centers. (Johnson et al. 24)

The important part of the planning stage, and the one I have most often overlooked, is the futurity stage. So often what I do in the center is either reacting, or at best planning for the semester ahead; in a cybernetic system, I am asked to look as far ahead as I possibly can. Allowing for innovation, creativity, maximum feedback, and positive reaction at all levels of the environment is of the utmost importance in my planning stage. Planning, not only for "incidents," but for the reception of both positive and negative feedback can be crucial not only in how the writing center actually works from day to day, but in how it is perceived by those who make the decisions about its fate, decisions which can be unfortunately often made in a vacuum.

Let me give a small example of the kind of long-range planning I've started to do: I know from personal experience that writing centers have a tendency to be ghettoized (or to ghettoize themselves)—sometimes in complete isolation, sometimes with other "remedial" or "student" services—in my case we're in a lovely, brand new facility, along side career services, academic support, counseling, housing, Greek affairs, the newspaper, the chaplain, the radio station, and the coffee shop. The number of days that go by without any sort of interaction between the writing center and the faculty is largely dependent upon my own willingness to leave the center and make evangelizing appearances around campus (in the English

department, the cafeteria, social events, etc.). So while I couldn't have really planned on the futurity of my current physical plant (it was built before I arrived here), I have to strategically plan, each year, for the various social functions that I going to go to, taking into account, of course, that the more time I'm away from the center, the more problems I could be facing there as well.¹

According to Johnson, et al.:

Planning, therefore, should be geared to obtaining, translating, understanding, and communicating information that will help to improve the rationality of current decisions which are based upon future expectations. (27)

There is another, more cynical, advantage to doing so much planning. Like it or not, many colleges and universities are becoming "lean and mean" (with an emphasis, no doubt, on the mean), and there is increasing pressure, especially upon the humanities, to cut costs, operate efficiently, and produce empirically tangible results, whatever those may be. The planning stage can produce important documentary evidence that the writing center is "doing something," which is more and more important to the futurity of the center.

While most writing centers do not have to worry about corporate problems like "diversification of product lines" and "competitors," there is a need to think, talk and plan² as well, ideas like "expansion of services," "channels of distribution" (centers, computers, OWLs, etc.), "industrial structure," and "potential customers."³ As well, I would caution strongly against forgetting to think about *internal* "competition"—many college and university administrations do not hesitate to foster competition amongst their various subsystems—competition for dollars, students, space, and/or resources can and does happen. It would be naive to assume that your brothers

and sisters in the academic support center or computer services don't desire your work-study money, tenure line, office space, or parking spot.

The first step in planning is the appraisal of "environmental system[s] to determine those economic, social, and political forces that will influence decision[s]" (Johnson et al. 37). In my case, this is the system (the environment) that always gets overlooked. In my first two years as a center director, I was obsessed with, in business terms, increasing my client or customer base, mainly through increased visibility (advertising and evangelizing). I was also very aware that I had to be able to go to the Dean in December and May with an ever-increasing set of numbers about who was using the center, how many times they were using it, and how happy they were with the services that were being provided.

What I overlooked were my "workers": Ten to fifteen work-study tutors and several volunteers whom I trusted to do their assigned tasks without any method for giving or receiving reliable feedback. I had completely failed to plan for their working environment (I was, for instance, simply grateful that they would work a lot of hours—I didn't think about what would happen if they quit, took time off, or, in our center's case, burned out in March). I misunderstood, because of the lack of reliable feedback mechanisms and the nature of the position (one I was essentially making up as I went along), the unhappiness of a few of my senior tutors (which, as you might guess, affected the entire center, since the tutors were there as much or more than I was during an average week). As it turns out, one unhappy tutor can do far more damage to a writing center than a number of unsatisfied customers.⁴

An increased emphasis and planning for environmental and/or political factors has informed my most recent year in the writing center, and I have seen

both the numbers of customers go up and have received positive feedback from a number of campus-wide sources: deans, professors, other students, and the tutors themselves. The hidden consequence of this new emphasis on feedback has been the ease with which I have been able to recruit tutors; the old tutors have let it be known (I'm assuming through informal discussions with peers and other professors on campus) that the writing center is one of the more demanding yet enjoyable work-study positions on campus.

This year my planning has taken even more of a cybernetic approach. While my work as center director improved dramatically, it has been through a series of temporary measures: simply being in the center more, while effective, is also impossible with my other duties on campus (teaching, WAC, Writing Committee, etc.). As well, I am resistant to the "bureaucratic" model of management where I am in the center acting like "the boss" all the time. That is not good for me, nor, in my opinion, is it all that good for the growth of the tutors. This year I have begun to emphasize, for the tutors, the idea of direction through self-regulation (Birnbaum 177-229). I have done this through the implementation of several cybernetic management functions, including "feedback loops," the "limiting of uncertainty," a quick "response to feedback," and the idea of "management by exception" (183-197). A feedback loop is a set of "structural or social control[s] that are sensitive to selected factors in the environment" (183). These might range from a suggestion box to the creation of an assistant-to-the-director position to a contract which tutors must sign which acknowledges their willingness to follow the center's policies.

The limiting of uncertainty is the attempt by the organization to reassure people both inside and outside of the center that the measurement of largely

unmeasurable goals (such as our center's goal to make better writers, not necessarily better writing) is not 100% necessary. This management function is largely in place so that I don't spend all of my time "comprehensively analyzing probable outcomes" (185) and instead can concentrate on making sure that tutors are tutoring in the best way they can. I have attempted to limit this uncertainty by creating a feedback loop between myself and the faculty at the college. I can then pass on the feedback to the tutors, and they can compare it to their own experiences in the center.

The quick response to feedback, while perhaps obvious, is crucial to the organization's survival in a larger, competitive environment. Let me digress: the writing center is, in management-speak, a subunit of the academic support services, which is in turn a subunit of the academic affairs division of the college (as opposed to student services, financial services, admissions, or athletics). The goal of the writing center is to respond to the larger organizational (i.e., the college's) goal of "communicative excellence." The center functions within a "series of structural, social, and cultural constraints established at higher levels of the organization" (185). These could be constraints about hours, tutors (work-study limits me to students in financial need), materials, etc., as well as more informal constraints including how I am supposed to treat tutors.

The response to feedback, especially negative feedback, from anyone in any area of the organization, must be swiftly dealt with. Student grumbling, concerns voiced by the dean, or tutor dismay—whatever the disturbance, stasis is unacceptable. Feedback loops in the form of surveys of teachers, users, and tutors have been established to attempt to monitor the ongoing feelings of the various users of the center. As well, my appearance at nearly all

campus functions this fall has led to greater visibility and a chance to discuss, one-on-one, the idea of the writing center with many colleagues and administrators.

The idea of management by exception is one that is more difficult to plan for. According to Birnbaum, “the cybernetic leader knows that appropriate corrective responses are likely already available in ongoing institutional systems” (197). In other words, it is important not to over-react to disturbances in the feedback loop. Listening to my tutors, constantly asking them for feedback has helped, as has reducing the number of hours a tutor can work, in an attempt to have more diversity amongst the tutors, and to avoid burnout. Neither of these were drastic changes in policy (I lowered the number of hours from 9 to 8 to 7 to this year, partly to avoid burnout, and partly to work within the new minimum wage). As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, “change,” especially when it is strictly for change’s sake, is not always that great. But administrators love change, even if (or when) that change is largely counterintuitive. I would advise that more often than not, “premature action may be the source of more mistakes than procrastination” (Birnbaum 199) and that planning for the future can make an administrator more able to deal with the day-to-day difficulties that running a writing center can bring about.

Obviously, no theory is perfect. I have not, in cybernetics, found religion, although I may speak of it with religious fervor once in a while. My joy in discovering cybernetics may well be the simple joy of something new; or it may be that as a floundering director, overwhelmed by my day-to-day responsibilities, the simple cold logic of management theory was a boon. I do not know. But I would caution against any theory being looked at as the panacea for the struggles of academic leadership. Birnbaum ends his

book with the following statement:

Because administrators experience equivocal environments, are affected by cognitive limitations that require them to make judgments under conditions of uncertainty, and cannot directly measure either their own effectiveness or the success of their [organizations], there are relatively few non-routine decisions or strategies whose outcomes they can predict with complete certainty. (202-3)

I would agree, and while the idea of a cybernetic system has been comforting to me as I worked to improve my own center direction, I am not done looking for improved methods for administration.

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Notes

¹ This may not, of course, always be the case. As a grad student, I worked in a writing center where we basically ran ourselves. As a director with only undergraduate tutors, at a small, private college, I find that the tutors *want* more direction, and will not hesitate to make my life difficult if I’m absent from the center for any length of time.

² Jeanne Simpson does an excellent job of critiquing the threat of professional (non-academic) competition in her article “Slippery Sylvans Sliding Sleekly into the Writing Center—Or Preparing for Professional Competition.” I would also argue, as Simpson does, that management ideas like TQM need to be looked at. If my essay has one focus that I’d like to make evident, it’s that we in academia (as a whole) and in the humanities specifically, need to be less afraid of accountability.

³ I am aware of the disdain in the academic community for calling students “customers” or “consumers.” Be that as it may, if at the end of a semester my student usage numbers are down, I do have to worry about my eroding customer base and its effect on my budget negotiations.

⁴ I have been lucky, however, in that I haven’t had to discover how a dissatisfied faculty member can affect the center.

Searchable Online Index

The *Writing Lab Newsletter* now has an online index, with a searchable database to titles and topics. Visit us at

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu:591/>

TUTORS' COLUMN

Using titles to spin a written web

Once a week I spend two hours in the Western Washington University Writing Center helping my peers with their writing. Though issues of organization often cause writers problems, I have found that finding a controlling idea or thesis statement challenges me both as a writer and as a writing assistant. In an effort to assist myself and others with this problem, I have found it useful to consider the writing process like the spinning of a web.

The controlling idea of a paper should be central in the work. Therefore, the thesis can be considered the center or attachment zone of a web. The threads that radiate from the center can be related to the ideas that connect to the main idea. I have found that writers often know the direction of the paper but have trouble spinning their ideas around a main idea. When this problem arises, using titles can help make the web stronger. Titles can act as the outer reinforcing thread of writers' webs spun around the central point of their papers.

Titles are often overlooked in writing conferences, and class assignments usually do not prioritize or even require titles. If required, writers tend to hastily attach titles as a last-minute step in fulfilling an assignment. Carefully considered, however, titles represent a crucial cord for reinforcing writers' main ideas. Whether in the form of a question or a phrase, titles direct readers to the center of the work. I have often referred to titles as clues to the meaning (content and context) of a paper. As primary readers, writing assistants can use these clues in order to make sense of writers' ideas. As web spinners, writers can use titles to locate

their main ideas. Attending to titles develops or establishes controlling ideas and ultimately allows writers to reorganize the rest of the paper around one idea.

Because drafts usually take many forms and stages, using titles all along the way to guide revision helps center the controlling idea. Since tutors and writers often overlook the importance of titles, the presence or absence of titles can help assistants diagnose problem areas. When writers come for help, they are immersed in the various stages of development. Identifying writers' stages helps assistants understand the level of engagement between writers and their webs. If writers possess a high level of engagement, their webs will most likely be shaped around one dominant idea rather than many different ones. On the other hand, when there is a low level of engagement, the central idea may be hidden in writers' webs or absent completely. Looking to titles can help indicate writers' levels of engagement and alert writing assistants to their web spinning stage. If writing assistants emphasize the role of titles in writers' webs, clarifying the thesis becomes easier.

Assistants can rely on three cases of title usage in helping writers locate and develop controlling ideas. When addressing the importance of titles in assisting writing, different strategies can be used to make tutoring more effective. The first case occurs when the absence of a title indicates an earlier stage of writing. Even the most primitive drafts can be improved with the addition of a title. At this point, developing a working title can be extremely helpful when assisting writers with

building webs through the revision process. When writers exclude a title, writing assistants can encourage them to draft several potential titles and then choose the most appropriate one. Looking for particularly effective short sentences or parts of sentences can help locate potential titles. Asking writers to pose the main question implicit in a draft assists them in establishing a title. Once established, a working title can help writers become more comfortable with discussing main ideas.

If a title exists, it can be a significant clue in determining the quality of a main idea. Often writers with a lower level of engagement will use generic or vague titles to mask their uncertainty about a controlling idea. A vague or generic title can be one that simply restates a main word from an assignment. One of the generic titles I used in an earlier stage of this paper was "All in a Title." This early title provided my paper's subject matter but did not point to the controlling idea. Later in my revision process, changing my title to "Using Titles to Guide Revision" made my controlling idea more evident. When presented with a generic or vague title, tutors can ask writers to orally describe and/or write down the main idea they are trying to express to help create a workable title. Again, locating key words from the draft and incorporating them into generic titles will improve titles and clarify controlling ideas. Through this process, writers can clarify for themselves what it is they really want to express. Once writers build confidence regarding their main ideas, the web spinning process becomes more productive.

Finally, a mismatched title may show a high level of creativity, but may not coincide with the controlling idea in the rest of the work. If a title does not match the rest of the paper, it can be beneficial to compare the proposed main idea side-by-side with the title. Often, diagnosing a mismatched title challenges assistants the most. For example, my revised title “Using Titles To Guide Revision” implied that titles could be used by writing assistants to help other writers with the revision process. However, in this particular case, my paper predominantly focuses on how titles provide a basis for locating the controlling idea of a paper which ultimately will help shape the “webs” writers spin. In this case, to say that titles merely help guide revision leaves out a large portion of my main idea including my controlling metaphor. Comparing this controlling idea with my title made the problem apparent. When a title conflicts with the rest of the paper, it may also be helpful to ask what purpose the title serves. Answering this question will help the writer gain a better understanding of the connection between titles and controlling ideas.

As writers work to organize controlling ideas and make them the centers of the webs they build, writing assistants work to make this process more fluid. The process of making the thesis central through title analysis helps writers’ webs become complete. Furthermore, developing titles that parallel the controlling idea enables the most primitive draft to become as strong as any well-spun web. Given the complexity of revision, using titles represents a simple way for spinning stronger texts.

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Selling the writing center’s services, or you, too, can be a magnet for business!

We live in a capitalist society where everyone seems to have a product to *sell*. In this instance, the product can be seen as the writing center’s services. With any business or service, there are steps that must be taken to ensure the continued success of that business. The maintained success of the writing center is no different.

One of the most important points to remember when trying to maintain a successful business is that to be an effective, thriving business, employees must have objectives that go beyond their own self-indulgence. In order to have a truly successful working environment, employees must have some other reason for doing their jobs—a reason other than earning a paycheck or an additional three units. This is not to say that it is impossible for a business to succeed if employees only care about their pay checks or the credit they earn, but if employees honestly believe in their product and care about the people they serve and about providing a quality service to those people, the public, that attitude will be evident to the consumer and foster the success of the business.

This mentality can be applied to the writing center as well. There are tutors who sincerely believe in the benefits of collaborative writing and care about helping students and with this attitude enhance the ambiance of the writing center and therefore its success. They are the tutors who

- take time to become fully knowledgeable about writing center practices and procedures;
- go the extra step to thoroughly learn their subject (composition and grammar);
- are eager to tutor and watch and wait anxiously for students to come through the door looking for help;
- are pleasant to work with and

smile, making it obvious that when they are on duty in the writing center, tutoring is their number-one priority.

Then there are the other tutors who

- find it easier to quickly edit a student’s paper rather than take the time to discuss the paper and let the student do the work;
- hide from students by appearing busy when the Team Leader is looking around the room for a tutor to help a student;
- do their own homework first and tutor second;
- use the writing center as simply a social gathering place;
- are moody and have a negative attitude.

These are the tutors who hamper the success of the writing center. These are the tutors who tutor solely for their own self-centered aims, and these are the tutors who should re-evaluate their decision to be a tutor in the writing center. As with most businesses today, a positive, team-oriented attitude is everything. If an employee’s attitude does not portray a genuine belief in the product or service the business provides and a desire to promote the success of that business, then he is a detriment rather than an asset to the company.

Another important factor in the success of a business and the popularity or marketability of a product is the necessity for the employees to know their product and its components. In the case of the writing center, it’s simple: the writing center’s services are our product and tutoring writing is the major component of that product. The tutors must have a tight grasp of the writing process and of the English language—grammar included. They must know this major component, understand its purpose and its value, and make it ap-

peal to the consumer. By tutoring a student, helping that student to improve his or her writing and thereby earn higher grades, the tutor is showing the student the advantage to using the writing center. If the tutor does not have a competent working understanding of writing and English usage and cannot help the student enough to demonstrate to the student the advantage of using the writing center, the student will not come back. Knowing the major components of the product is a necessity for the success of any business or service.

Now, there are three more obvious requirements to ensure the success of a company or business. The first is the need to provide the consumer with a positive experience. This is very important in the writing center. The student must feel important, valued. He must feel that the tutors *want* to help him succeed in his writing task. If he walks through the door and all the tutors quickly look away and then scatter to find something else to do rather than approach him and warmly offer their services, he is most likely going to feel like a burden or a nuisance and leave. If he walks in and is ignored or feels like he must interrupt a tutor's conversation with another tutor to ask for help, he probably will not come back. However, if he is eagerly approached as soon as he walks through the door and feels that the tutor sincerely cares

about him as a writer and about helping him with his writing task, he will have a positive experience which will ultimately contribute to the success of the writing center.

Perhaps the most obvious ingredient in a successful establishment is providing quality service. If the service is poor, the life of the business will be short. (That's no brain buster.) Again, this is no different for the writing center. The tutors must be well trained professionals and behave as such. That's the bottom line. If they participate in the formal Tutorial Projects classes; complete their assigned class work; know, understand and carry out their duties; live up to their responsibilities; and work well with people, the quality of service in the writing center will be superb and the writing center will be a success.

A final necessity for the success of a business is repeat business. If you think of it on a small scale, it may make more sense. Think of it this way: Let's say Modesto Junior College only has twenty students. If each one of those students comes to the writing center only once for help, very soon there will be no more students to help, and the writing center will have to close. However, if students have positive experiences and receive quality service, they will become repeat customers, making the writing center es-

sential and promoting even further the success of the writing center. Certainly, each student who comes in for help can be seen as one customer. But if you can create repeat business with each student, then you have doubled, tripled, or quadrupled your customers, depending on how many times that student comes back. This is something to keep in mind. Helping one student doesn't mean helping only one customer. When you create repeat business, you have customers equivalent to the number of times that student returns.

The writing center is a business with a product to sell. If we can all take the simple business approach, the writing center can be a major success with a permanent existence. It's really not complicated: Have an unselfish desire to meet the customer's needs, know your product, create a positive experience, provide quality service, and establish repeat business. Then enjoy your success!

Aubrey Rhodes
Modesto Junior College
Modesto, CA

(At the time of this writing, Aubrey was working both as an Area Coordinator for Field Source, a division of Pepsi, and as a tutor-mentor in the Modesto Junior College Writing Center. —Barbara Jensen, Coordinator)

Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals
September 25-26
Pullman, Washington
"Weaving New Communities and Conversations in the
Writing Center"
Keynote speakers: Sue McLeod, Bill Condon, Gabrielle
Duhamel, Kelly Crook

For a cover sheet and guidelines for proposals, contact Lisa Johnson-Shull, Washington State University Writing Center, Avery Hall 451, Pullman, WA 99164-5046. Phone: 509-335-7695; fax: 509-335-2582; e-mail: ljohnson@mail.wsu.edu. Deadline for proposals: June 1, 1998.

NWCA Press announces two new publications

Weaving Knowledge Together: Writing Centers and Collaboration

Edited by Carol Peterson Haviland, Maria Notarangelo, Lene Whitley-Putz, and Thia Wolf (ISBN 0-9648067-1-1; 239 pp.)

This book provides an exploration into the rich collaborations which define writing centers. Each chapter has been written collaboratively by a writing center director, tutor, and client.

Writing Center Resource Manual

Edited by Bobbie Bayliss Silk (ISBN 0-9648067-2-X)

This loose-leaf book, wrapped for three-ring binder, offers practical advice and essential materials for all writing center professionals. Chapters include starting, directing, and assessing writing centers, secondary and community college writing centers, writing center resources and websites, tutoring training, and much more. Binders not included.

Prices:

Weaving Knowledge Together: \$15.00

Writing Center Resource Manual: \$15.00

(Add \$2.00 per book for shipping and handling.)

To order, send checks to Carl Glover; Managing Editor: NWCA Press; P. O. Box 7007; 16300 Old Emmitsburg Road; Emmitsburg, MD 21727. For further information: e-mail: glover@msmary.edu; phone: 301-447-5367.

The Writing Program Beloit College

Beloit College invites applications for two full-time faculty positions beginning August 1 in the Writing Program, at instructor or assistant professor level. Non-tenure-track; annual contract, renewable. Duties for each position include teaching five sections per year of College Writing 100; tutoring in the college's campus-wide writing center; assisting in tutor training, writing center workshops, and workshops for individual classes. MA or ABD in composition/rhetoric required, PhD preferred. Preference will be given to candidates with interest in writing in the disciplines.

Beloit College is a select liberal arts college enrolling 1200 students. Located on the Wisconsin/Illinois border, the city of Beloit is near Chicago, Milwaukee, and Madison. The College is committed to a diverse community and urges all interested persons to apply. Candidates should send a letter of interest and dossier by May 22, 1998 to Anita R. Guynn; Director of the Writing Program; Box 262; Beloit College; Beloit, WI 53511. Inquiries: 608-363-2360; guynnar@beloit.edu AA/EEO employer

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

- May 8-9: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Youngstown, OH
Contact: Sherri Zander, Writing Center, One University Plaza, Youngstown State U., Youngstown, OH 44555. Phone: 330-742-3055; e-mail: sdzander@cc.ysu.edu
- Sept. 25-26: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in Pullman, WA
Contact: Lisa Johnson-Shull, WSU Writing Center, Avery Hall 451, Pullman, WA 99164-5046. Phone: 509-335-7695; fax: 509-335-2582; e-mail: ljohnson@mail.wsu.edu
- Oct. 8-10: Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association, in Salt Lake City, UT
Contact: Jane Nelson, U. of Wyoming Writing Center, Center for Teaching Excellence, Coe Library, Laramie, WY 828071. E-mail: jnelson@uwyo.edu; phone: 307-766-5004; fax: 307-766-4822
- Oct. 23-24: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Milwaukee, WI
Contact: Allison James, Hawley Academic Resource Center, Simpson College, 701 North C St., Indianola, IA 50125. Phone: 515-961-1524; fax: 515-961-1363; e-mail: james@storm.simpson.edu

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Student agendas and expectations (Part IV): Requests for evaluation

All of us who work in writing centers have had to face the following question from a student at one time or another: "If you had to give this paper a grade right now, what grade would you give it?" It's a perfectly natural question to ask, and to students, we're a perfectly appropriate audience to ask it of.

We've seen hundreds if not thousands of student papers through our work as tutors or teachers, and we should have a pretty good idea of how one student paper stacks up against another. Besides, to put it bluntly, it's our *job* to read and evaluate student writing, to make assessments of its strengths and weaknesses, and to discern how best to solve whatever problems that writing might have. Much of what we do in our conferences with students is talk about our evaluations of their papers' relative merits. Why shouldn't students expect us to know what sort of grade their paper might ultimately receive?

Well, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, an evaluation is not an evaluation. One of the best known and most anecdotally used pieces of research in English studies is Paul Diederich, John French, and Sydell Carlton's study of grading practices among experienced teachers of English which demonstrated rather conclusively that it is pointless to talk about individual papers having innate "A" qualities or "B" qualities that can be discerned and agreed upon by all audiences. This study showed that even among members of the same discipline and area of study, the same student paper could receive any grade from "A" to "F," depending on the particular criteria and set of standards being applied (Diederich 5). Once we expand the range of evaluation variables

to include discipline-specific criteria with which a particular tutor is likely to be unfamiliar, the likelihood of being able to guess at an "accurate" grade decreases exponentially. Fortunately, most students are generally willing to accept our explanation that it is "against policy" to guess at grades, since we can never know exactly what a particular instructor will be looking for in a given paper.

And speaking pragmatically, there is no better way to sabotage any sort of close relation between the writing center and faculty members than to allow tutors to start speculating about paper grades in conferences. Whenever students ask my opinion about their potential grade, the first image that comes to my mind is that big robot from *Lost in Space*, waving his arms and shouting, "Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!" There is nothing in the world that will guarantee an angry phone call from an irate faculty member more certainly than a student who tells his instructor, "Why did you give me a 'B' on this paper? The people in the writing center said it deserved an 'A.'"

Yet, as I said before, an evaluation is not an evaluation. Tutors *do* evaluate student papers. They may not give letter grades or suggest what grades others will give, but they form opinions about the papers they read. They know what they like about them, they know what they dislike about them, and they probably have an impression about how good or bad the paper is relative to the other papers they've looked at over the years—or even when compared to other papers from the same class. The real ethical questions here are: Which

evaluations can ethically be passed on to the student? How should these evaluations be phrased and/or contextualized? What sorts of evaluative comparisons are ethical for writing center tutors to make and which are not? As in previous columns, let me offer a few scenarios for you to consider in this regard. Ask yourself whether you would respond in the same way for each scenario, or whether there are critical differences that would cause you to act differently with one or more.

The Context: A student who has been to the center several times before comes in for an appointment with you, toting a ten-page draft of a political science paper in his backpack. This is the first time you personally have worked with him, but the notes in his file from other tutors indicate that he is particularly concerned about grades and his performance in class, possibly because he's a pre-law student and hopes to attend an ivy league university in another two years.

1) After reading through the paper with him, you have a sense that the paper is basically well written and well organized and makes some good use of examples. Some of the transitions are a bit weak, and the focus seems to wander from the main line of argument occasionally, but you work with him on these areas productively. He seems bright and motivated if somewhat anxious about composing a "perfect" paper. At the end of the conference, you tell him you think he did a pretty good job on the paper overall and that you enjoyed reading it. He then asks you, "If you had to give a grade to this paper, what grade would you give it?"

2) [Same situation as #1, but at the end of the conference:] He then asks you, "Compared to the other political science papers you've seen students bring in here, how do think this one rates?"

3) After reading through the paper with him, you realize that his draft contains some fairly significant flaws, including a thesis—"Democracy is the best political system ever conceived by man"—that is too vague and too broad (not to mention sexist) to be defended adequately in an eight to ten page paper. He tends to rely overmuch on unsub-

stantiated assertions about democracy, totalitarianism, fascism, and communism, confusing sloganeering with evidence. You spend a fair amount of time in the tutorial session addressing some of these issues with him, and in spite of your attempts to be supportive and helpful in guiding the next revision, he begins to get more and more upset. By the end of the conference, he seems to be near tears. Just before he leaves, he asks you, "Compared to the other political science papers you've seen students bring in here, how do think this one rates?"

4) [Same situation as #3, but this time:] Just before he leaves, he asks you, "If I make the changes we talked about in my next revision, do you think it will at least be a passing paper?"

Michael A. Pemberton
University of Illinois
Urbana, IL

Work Cited

Diederich, Paul. *Measuring Growth in English*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1974.

New from NCTE

Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum, edited by Donna Reiss, Dickie Selfe, and Art Young. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1998. 326 pp., softcover. Price: \$26.95; NCTE members: \$19.95. ISBN: 0-8141-1308-7
(Available from NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096; 800-369-6283. Stock number: 13087-0015)

This collection of two dozen essays addresses what can happen when parallel growth in technology and writing-across-the-curriculum programs intersect. Some of the essays are case studies in classroom projects such as electronic journaling, and others deal with Online Writing Labs (OWLs), e-mail, synchronous conferencing, asynchronous learning networks, MUDs, and MOOs. Also included are numerous references to helpful Internet resources.

The editors are presently working with NCTE's Webmanager to create an interactive Web site (<http://www.ncte.org/ecac>) in which, as the site is developed, readers will be able to pose questions to both the editors of the book and its various contributors.

Teaching College English and English Education: Reflective Stories, edited by H. Thomas McCracken and Richard Larson with Judith Entes. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1998. 383 pp., softcover. Price: \$32.95; NCTE members: \$24.95. ISBN: 0-8141-5037-3.

(Available from NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096; 800-369-6283. Stock number: 50373-0015)

What is English? Each section of this book of essays starts with personal essays by members of the profession, and then departmental essays, historical essays, and finally teaching essays. The various essays give readers an array of entry points into the larger discussion about what constitutes English studies, English education, and English itself. In this book, unfortunately, those entry points don't include writing centers.

National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing

November 6-8, 1998
Plattsburgh, NY

"*Writers as Readers: Readers as Writers*"

Registration materials will be available in September. Contact Mary Dossin, Claude Clark Learning Center, 101 Broad St., Plattsburgh State University, Plattsburgh, NY 12901-2681. Phone: 518-564-6138; e-mail: dossinmm@splava.cc.plattsburgh.edu; Web site: <http://www.plattsburgh.edu/cas>

NWCA News from Al DeCiccio, President

Writing Center scholarship and NWCA were on display at the 1998 Annual Convention in Chicago

Thanks to Neal Lerner (NWCA Treasurer), Byron Stay (Editor, NWCA Press), and all those who helped out, NWCA was able to display membership materials and samples of scholarship to many of the 4,000 people who attended the convention and who browsed the exhibit area. At the NWCA booth, two new NWCA publications could be ordered: *Writing Center Resource Manual*, edited by Bobbie Silk, and *Weaving Knowledge Together*, edited by Carol Haviland, Maria Notarangelo, Lene Whitly-Putz, and Thia Wolf. Both of these texts may be ordered through Carl Glover, Business Manager, NWCA Press, P. O. Box 7007, 16300 Old Emmitsburg Rd, Emmitsburg, MD 21727 (see page 12).

From the "all-day" preconvention workshop through the M and N sessions on Saturday morning and early afternoon, writing center workers discussed the WCenter listserv, WAC, Writing Center Administration, OWLs, and a variety of pedagogical practices that illustrated to me what Nancy Grimm noted and called for in her "award-winning" article, "The Regulatory Tale of the Writing Center: Coming to Terms with a Loss of Innocence": "Writing center scholars . . . made significant arguments about the limits of academic literacy and . . . offered . . . complicated representations of students. The next step is to bring this work into contact with those campus committees that are open to reform and with composition scholars who are considering monologic practices of literacy" (*WCJ* 17.1 [Fall 1996]: 23).

The workshop (organized by Neal Lerner) was useful for everyone—and it was the workshop with the most par-

ticipants. I thoroughly enjoyed addressing my colleagues at the NWCA Special Interest Group session. There, Muriel Harris, Joan Mullin, and Byron Stay spoke thoughtfully about the future of writing center scholarship. At that session, I had the honor of presenting the NWCA Scholarship Award to Nancy Grimm (one of the leaders in our field) for her *WCJ* article "The Regulatory Tale of the Writing Center: Coming to Terms with a Loss of Innocence." Given the CCCC Chair's Address "Literacy, Technology, and the Politics of Education in America," wherein Cynthia Selfe asserted that in the United States today literacy and technology are inextricably linked in ways that will make it hard for many citizens to recognize the potentially negative economic, social, and political ramifications of technology in the classroom, it was rewarding to me that we gave an award to one of our own writing center workers who has already warned us against "thinking about literacy as a neutral, self-governed technical skill that all individuals have equal opportunity to acquire. . . ." (*WCJ* 17.1 [Fall 1996]: 18). It was indeed appropriate to give the award to this article, and all who work in the writing center should read it in order to find out why, according to Grimm, "we need to acknowledge that literacy work is not innocent, that when we engage in literacy practices with others we are at the same time engaged in making or preserving knowledge, in community maintaining or community building, in changing or reproducing power relations" (*WCJ* 17.1 [Fall 1996]: 23).

In the business meeting that followed, the Executive Board agreed to a

few actions that writing center workers may find interesting: (1) We unanimously voted to welcome our colleagues across the pond to NWCA and thus there is now a European Affiliate to NWCA; (2) we applauded the efforts Ray Smith has already made for the next NWCA conference next April 15 -18 in Bloomington, Indiana; (3) after a thoughtful presentation by Jo Tavers, Dennis Paoli, and Marcia Silver and a spirited discussion about it, the Board agreed to accept the self-study accreditation/assessment questionnaire authored by Tavers, Paoli, and Silver (this can be found on our website) and to move NWCA closer to a system of formal accreditation/assessment. What this latter point means is that I will prepare such a proposal for the Board after consultation with many sources (WPA, CRLA, and our own colleagues with expertise, interest, and concern in and for the issue). If the Board approves it, then I will put the proposal on the website for the consideration of the membership before we get to the point of voting on it.

Clearly, this last is the issue that is hottest for us right now and it will take some time to resolve it in a way that will make sense for all of us (e.g., it was suggested that if NWCA sends out teams for assessing writing centers, then (1) these teams will need training and thus those with expertise should be about the business now of holding sessions at upcoming conferences in order to train a potential pool of accrediting consultants, and (2) effort should be made to draw accrediting consultants from the region of the center being accredited or assessed). I have confidence that we will do what it takes to

(cont. on page 4)

Software for writing lab record keeping

AccuTrack, a software package for writing labs and learning centers, is designed as a sign-in sheet replacement. Visiting students use the computer to sign in and out by entering their Social Security Numbers, a process accomplished by using the keyboard or an optical ID reader. The program has reporting features as well, for directors can view and print accurate activity reports for any time period they choose. AccuTrack has two reports: Activity Report and User Report, and each can be viewed either in Detail or in Summary form. An additional feature of the program is that it can be used as an electronic messaging system as well. Messages and reminders can be sent to any user, and users can send messages to each other. Messages are delivered at sign in or sign out times.

AccuTrack collects statistical data when the student signs in the first time, and this can be the student's name, major, and college standing, or any other data needed. The program asks for this information during the first sign in session only, and that information is then stored in the computer. Next, AccuTrack asks the student to select the reason for the visit by choosing an item from a list of activities. This list is set

and maintained by the system administrator, and reflects services available to the student. When the activity is selected, the system records the time of sign in, and to sign out, the student enters his or her ID. The time of sign out is automatically recorded as well.

AccuTrack is customizable software. Engineering Systems, Inc., the company that developed it, can modify the program to fit individual data collection and reporting needs. The program runs on Windows 95 or NT computers, and a networked version will be available soon.

The retail price of the software is \$695; however, colleges and universities qualify for discounted academic pricing of \$495, which includes sign in screen customization with the facility's name and logo. The optical ID reader is an additional \$399. For a free evaluation package (for a 30-day trial period) or for further information, contact Engineering Systems, Inc., P.O. Box 677096, Orlando, FL 32867; phone: 407-678-0440 or 407-381-2730; fax: 407-678-2795; e-mail: mon@engineerica.com; Web site: <http://www.engineerica.com>

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