

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 23, Number 7

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing March, 1999

## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

The articles in this month's newsletter have a penchant for long titles. They also share another affinity—to revisit traditional goals and find new ways of achieving them. As Albert DeCiccio reflects on the results of a service learning project Merrimack tutors were engaged in, he finds in this service learning program a way to effect the kinds of change that collaboration promises. Mary Broglie reconsiders the value of publishing a newsletter when it becomes a means for her tutors reflect on their tutoring. Kristie Speirs re-examines the notion that the tutor's role is primarily supportive and affective and only secondarily instructional, and Nicholas A. Plunkey reminds us how important it is to help students achieve confidence in their own ideas.

Also please note a change in a notice that appeared in the January newsletter. The new address from which to order your copy (@\$21) of the *Writing Center Directory* is as follows:

Metagraphix /Attn: Kelly Lawrence  
777 East Wisconsin Avenue  
Milwaukee, WI 53202  
phone: 414-271-9995  
fax: 414-271-9656.

They accept checks and credit cards.

• Muriel Harris, editor

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## "I feel a power coming all over me with words": Writing centers and service learning

I want to share some results from my study of a writing center program that show why Bruffee was right when he said writing centers can be agents of change. The study is based on the stories several writing center tutors composed while involved in a year-long, cross-age tutoring program. The student-writers with whom they worked had been considered "the truly illiterate among us" (qtd. in Rose 3). But I think you will agree, misspellings notwithstanding, that their words are good reason to continue working in the writing center. These young people, involved in a service-learning program born out of a writing center, represent our hope. I believe all involved in the program (particularly, the student-tutors and their student-writers) changed cognitively and socially. As Bruce Herzberg has noted about the service-learning program he and Edward Zlotkowski established at Bentley College, "Students will not critically question a world that seems natural, inevitable, given; instead, they will

strategize about their position within it. Developing a social imagination makes it possible not only to question and analyze the world, but also to imagine transforming it” (317). In the program I describe, participants indeed develop a social imagination. As a result, the young student-writers no longer view writing (and, by extension, their education) as oppressive and meaningless; in fact, as writing tutor Martha Rossi wrote about the past year’s group of students, “Every single student in this program has plans for going to college and each has a career goal”; the stu-

dent-tutors learn that the world around them is not given or neutral; and both sets of students demand of their faculty and their institutions that their curriculum not remain static.

### Overview

*The writing workshop is the greatest thing in the world. . . I love writing because you go on an adventure when your writing. It’s easy, it’s like writing a poem or a fragrance.*

Christian Cabrera, 4th grader

The writing produced in the Andover Bread Loaf Writing Workshop is by elementary and middle school students from Lawrence, Massachusetts, an economically disadvantaged, former mill city with a very significant minority population. The students are involved in writing workshops inspired by the Phillips Academy (Andover) / Bread Loaf / Merrimack College partnership, a writing program in which American, European, Indian, Pakistani, and South African teachers are provided theoretical and pedagogical alternatives to teaching writing based on those espoused by the Bread Loaf School of Writing (Martin; Britton; Goswami) and writing center theorists such as Kenneth Bruffee and Andrea Lunsford. The aim is to have participants go back to their schools and apply such concepts, eliciting the kind of powerful writing—indeed, the enthusiasm for writing—to help all participants become active, questioning, contributing subjects—first, in their classrooms and, more importantly, in their communities.

But the teachers have help: Merrimack College students. The students are selected because of their knowledge of collaborative learning and expertise in tutoring. With financial support provided by Merrimack’s higher administration and its Urban Resource Institute and with ongoing training provided by the College’s Writing Center, the student-tutors then follow up by working in the Lawrence schools. They provide assistance and a breath

of fresh air to the teachers as well as support and counsel to the younger students. The group of Merrimack students function as cross-age tutors, responsible for leading workshops to inspire effective writing from the younger students. As Schutz and Gere have pointed out, “Service learning provides a way for those in positions of privilege and power in the university to place themselves in the positions of ‘learners,’ as they request and gain entry into communities, often disenfranchised communities, within and beyond their own and attempt to discover, in conjunction with those in these new communities, what they can offer to those they wish to ‘serve’” (146). Among the most important results are that the elementary and middle school students no longer view school, especially reading and writing, as irrelevant and irresponsible and, perhaps even more significantly, that the experience shatters the college students’ middle-class visions of reality and reveals what is really in the looking glass: physical and emotional violence, oppression, repression, fear, and so forth. Ultimately, in true Freirean fashion, the younger students are encouraged to become tutors in a future iteration of the program and the college tutors learn how to ask for social and curricular changes at Merrimack.

### A Breath of Fresh Air

*I am a star,  
I wonder if I’m a shooting star.  
I am a baseball card,  
I wonder if I am worth a lot.  
I am a karate pig,  
I wonder if I can do pork chops.  
I am a piece of bubble gum,  
I wonder if I will keep poppin’.  
I am a broken pencil,  
I wonder if I have a point.  
I am a shamrock,  
I wonder if I’m lucky.  
I am a map,  
I wonder if people could find there way.*

Kathy Pham, 5th grader

When the tutors arrived at Lawrence’s Frost School, their initial

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**Subscriptions:** The newsletter has no billing procedures. Yearly payments of \$15 (U.S. \$20 in Canada) are requested, and checks must be received four weeks prior to the month of expiration to ensure that subscribers do not miss an issue. Please make checks payable to Purdue University and send to the editor. Prepayment is requested from business offices.

**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).

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foray into cross-age tutoring, the noise of the playground activity was palpable. Voices rose in play. The tutors recalled their days in grammar school as they observed the rows of neat little desks, each with its own dog-eared name tag and tiny chair; the cartoon posters (each with a tidbit of wisdom no child should do without); the brightly papered bulletin board decorated with the word of the day and the theme of the month; the math and grammar corners for children who had finished class work early. The tutors were led down corridors, up stairs, and down more corridors. Deep in the maze of the large school was the room they were assigned. When they entered, they noticed the children were quiet and seemed bolted to their seats. The tutors became aware that in entering this room, they would have to change this scenario if they were going to foster the creativity that results from freedom. The children greeted the tutors enthusiastically. The young learners were excited when told that they would write and then read their pieces aloud.

The tutors passed out "I wish" poems, and asked the children to emulate them as best they could, starting each line with "I wish." They set to work. The tutors watched them working ideas out in their heads, chewing on words, spitting out thoughts, and filling the lines of the paper. They heard the scratching of quickly moving pencils as the students tried to capture all their thoughts on the page. The students would run up to the tutors, wanting them to read their poems. The students were hungry for comments, for approval. They asked, "Is this right?" and the tutors told them that they couldn't be wrong. The faces of the students absolutely beamed when the tutors explained they were the authors of their own creative discourse and no one could tell them their words were wrong. This seemed to elicit pride in their writing, and the tutors observed that the children began to develop in themselves a sense of worth. The fact that there were no grades at stake seemed to make them flourish; they

could extend and expand themselves without academic risk. They were writing for themselves and for their classmates, not with the teacher and the grade in mind, which gave them a more important stake in the writing process and encouraged them to write freely and powerfully.

Eventually it was time for the students to complete their poems and read to the class. After forming a circle, the tutors watched 90 percent of the hands shoot up when they asked who wanted to read first. As the tutors listened, they became exhilarated and sometimes depressed. This emotional roller coaster ride lasted throughout the year. Though spelling, word usage, and punctuation were not always correct, the poems were among the most beautiful and poignant the tutors had ever read or heard. Perhaps it was the children's utter honesty; perhaps it was that they had not been told exactly what to do. But the poetry was free, uncensored, pure, potent. The students dealt with issues such as family life, racism, child abuse, drugs, alcohol, war, death, divorce, self-worth, and crime. These young students were forced to deal with things the tutors may not have even known existed when they were the students' age.

The tutors were finding out that their success would depend upon negotiating the differences between themselves and the younger students. As Kenneth Bruffee explains, "differences tend to silence students with regard to each other. As a result, everyone loses" (11). However, everyone involved had to learn how to negotiate differences "at the boundaries of the communities" they belonged to. Thus, as the tutors discovered, "the most important educational issue they [faced was] finding out what they [had] in common with other students they [met], and how to use those common elements to bridge the community boundaries that [separated] them" (Bruffee 11).

This experience quickly reaffirmed what the tutors learned at Phillips and

what they had practiced in Merrimack's Writing Center. They were finding out that collaborative learning (which included dialogue, debate, negotiation, compromise, and change) was not just what a few liberals did at Phillips or at Merrimack; collaborative learning was a viable practice even when it crossed boundaries the tutors had not yet encountered and when it involved negotiating differences in age, sex, culture, race. Implementing these writing workshops in the Lawrence schools revealed to the tutors first-hand that when students themselves are allowed to assume the responsibility for their learning, the learning process becomes more positive, more beneficial. The active nature of the writing workshop empowered the students and allowed them to stake a claim in their learning. The idea of the circle, which enabled reading and responding, provided each student with a tangible support group as she or he assumed the risk involved in revealing her- or himself in writing. Ultimately, the group fostered trust, built respect, and instilled confidence, rather than an unhealthy competition that leads one student in a wayward race to outdo the other. And when the tutors said they were students too, the younger students saw them as allies. When the tutors listened to the students' work and read their own, the respect needed to get things done was forthcoming. It wasn't just because the tutors respected the children's ability to write; their own teachers, for the most part, afforded such respect. It was, perhaps, because the tutors were closer in age and status to them. They could deal with issues involved with learning more effectively than the students' teachers could, because the relationship was less mannered and strained. It appears that the tutors and the students were actualizing Vygotsky's ZPD (zone of proximal development) that enabled them to nudge each other into a collaboration of productive work.

### **Hazy, Hot and Humid: Some Sticky Situations**

*i remember my brother trying to*

*make a cake on my birthday.  
i remember my brother taking me to  
the movies every Sunday.  
i remember my brother Halloween  
he always go out.  
i remember my brother never saying  
Hello.  
i remember him telling me to go  
home.  
i remember him saying never fight.  
but the saddest thing is he never said  
good bye to me when he died.*

Ismael Torres, 4th grader

The tutors learned, perhaps the hard way, that being cross-age tutors does not always translate into a constructive ZPD. Sometimes they were perceived by the students as big brothers or sisters who should be tested, not respected. Yet, the students' teachers felt the tutors should be able to handle such situations by virtue of their status as college students and graduates of the Phillips / Merrimack College / Bread Loaf partnership. Thus the tutors were sometimes caught in the middle, grasping at straws for some practice that would make the workshops the productive places of learning that they usually were. At other times, students in the workshops seemed reluctant to work; occasionally, they downright refused. The tutors wanted to nudge them into a collaboration with their peers, for they had come to accept that working together would be productive. The tutors learned, in a way neither their college backgrounds nor their experiences in the Phillips / Merrimack College / Bread Loaf partnership could teach, that there were huge obstacles preventing the students from entering a circle. They weren't just being stubborn.

For instance, in a writing workshop for fifth graders, Tanya often sat in the corner of the room, with her head in the crook of her arm, crying. The tutors heard her talk of wanting to kill herself and how she hated everything about school. They tried to get her to put her feelings on paper, but school was a place so terrible for Tanya that she could not find the courage even to lis-

ten to the other students read their work. Upon being approached by one of the tutors, Tanya learned to trust. After a few sessions of having the tutor write her ideas as she dictated them, she began to write on her own. She wrote about dark and tragic moments—obviously, what she had been feeling—and even wrote how she felt that she was simply a “ghost trapped inside the body of a child.” Naturally, Tanya spooked the tutors, for they wanted the students to deal in wishes and dreams. But they learned that building a circle of support, for some, involved much more than simply saying, “Okay, now let's get into a circle and read our work.” As Bruffee points out, it involves understanding, compassion, and seeing things in a far different way than the tutors had perceived them in simply reading about them in books and magazines.

Lack of confidence and fear of failure were two common reasons why some of the workshop students were reluctant at first to be drawn into the circle. The causes of such resistance were varied and somewhat foreign to the tutors. In an after-school workshop, Nicholas, a fourth grade writer, displayed no interest in writing. He often made his own fun, however, by directing attention to himself—being loud, or being defiant, for instance. The tutors felt it was their responsibility to find out why Nicholas would direct his energy in such unhealthy directions, instead of channeling it in a more productive way, writing. They found out, unfortunately from his teacher who whispered loudly enough for the on-looking group to hear, that “His mother enrolls him in as many programs as she can because he is such a problem.” The tutors learned that Nicholas' confidence had been shattered time after time; as a result, his self-esteem was very low, leaving him to draw attention and affirmation in any way he could. Often, as when his teacher reprimanded him and set him apart from the group, his actions served to further deflate his ego.

The best the tutors were able to do with Nicholas was to get him to write with them, sometimes every other line to an “I wish” poem, and to integrate him into the group by helping him conduct an interview of a peer. Their hope is that Nicholas' involvement in more workshops will get him to write out his feelings in the security of the support system the workshops foster. This may enable him to gather some confidence and to rebuild his sense of self-worth. It seems that Nicholas, like so many of the other Lawrence students, will do well if he can continue working in this environment, in the “Burkean Parlor” Andrea Lunsford has described, for it will engage students like Nicholas “not only in solving problems set by teachers but in identifying problems for themselves; not only in working as a group but in monitoring, evaluating, and building a theory of how groups work; not only in understanding and valuing collaboration but in confronting squarely the issues of control that successful collaboration inevitably raises; not only in reaching consensus but in valuing dissensus and diversity (Lunsford 5). Now, while Nicholas' story has not been completed, I can be hopeful about what will happen to him when I think about the author of the line in the first part of my title. Carlos, himself very resistant at first, not only succeeded in his writing workshop: “I feel a power all over me with words!”; he is now a cross-age tutor in the program, conspicuously engaged in the conversations unfolding in the parlors of the writing workshop.

### **The Winds of Change**

*My Grandmother's House  
The smell of strawberry.  
All the taste of fruit.  
The sound of cars.  
The touch of flowers.  
Dogs barking.*

Juan Gonzales, 4th grader

The tutors observed that the self-discovery that should take place as a student goes through school is sometimes stifled in a traditional classroom.

There, competition is promoted in a myopic search for the “best” student. Such a system profits precious few students. Most end up labeled “mediocre,” at best, and, as we have already seen, “the truly illiterate among us,” more often than we would like to admit. These stigmatized students may equate their supposed “low rank” with their self-worth and, as a result, may isolate themselves, fearing that any attempt at integration may be met with ridicule. Not participating in a learning activity is occasionally associated with behavior dysfunction (It may be even more than occasional if we were to deconstruct the rise in incidences of ADD and ADHD), not as what it may really be—fear of oppression. The writing workshops—open and supportive—demonstrated to the tutors that such fears can be met and overcome.

Eddie, a fourth grade student-writer, attended one of the after-school writing workshops. Eddie would either immediately seclude himself to a corner, or play raucously until the teacher would send him to the corner. Labeled a discipline problem, Eddie developed a reactionary pattern to the discipline—he would refuse to participate with tears of defiance. Sometimes Eddie would even attempt to escape from the room, and one successful fleeing nearly resulted in serious injuries. If Eddie did not remove himself immediately, he would ultimately withdraw from participation when he felt his dignity was challenged. The pattern, day after day, seemed hopeless.

The situation with Eddie presented the tutors with a difficult problem. Often Eddie would disrupt the work of other writers. The teacher’s authority in the after-school workshop—her decision to discipline Eddie—was difficult to challenge. Yet, the interaction between the two seemed unproductive and unnecessarily severe. The tutors often discussed Eddie, for all had tried to reach him; but by the time the tears started it was too late: Eddie would not look at or talk to them. In Eddie’s eyes,

the tutors had become the teacher. However, the tutors felt that the setting in the writing workshop could potentially offer Eddie an alternative to that of the classroom. In the workshop, they never forced the writers to write. They would not force the suggested writing assignment, nor themselves, on Eddie. Yet, with more than one of them in the program at once, they had the freedom to spend extra time with Eddie if he would allow it.

The tutors decided that persistence was the best answer for Eddie. Every class one of them, the one to whom Eddie seemed responsive at the time, would attempt to make contact. If Eddie didn’t want to talk, no one pressed him; or if he asked to be left alone, he would be obliged. The tutors assumed that as Eddie saw his friends get recognition for their writing, he too would want to join in. These tutors realized what it took someone like Jane Tompkins, despite all of her learning and accomplishments, nearly thirty years to understand: “People’s personalities won’t be visible, their feelings and opinions won’t surface, unless the teacher [or tutor] gets out of the way on a regular basis. You have to be willing to give up your authority, and the sense of identity and prestige that come with it, for the students to be able to feel their own authority” (147).

Although Eddie’s progress was slow, eventually he began to join the writers. By developing a relationship with the tutors, Eddie began to realize that no one would force anything on him—the time in the workshop was his. At first he wouldn’t speak much at all to them. One day he began doing math homework. The tutors engaged him in a brief conversation about computers and math, but never pushed writing on him. For the next couple of weeks Eddie would doodle on his paper, but would always conceal it. But as Eddie watched his friends laugh and clap for each other, the tutors could see that he was drawing closer to the group. He began showing his drawings. When the

tutors asked if they could show the writers his drawing, Eddie declined at first. By the end of the class Eddie begged to show the writers what he was drawing. He sat in the circle with the writers. For the first time the tutors saw Eddie smile.

## Conclusions

The arrangement for the writing workshops the tutors have been involved with is informal, but not unstructured. There’s work—acquiring a process for writing powerfully—that’s demanded and accomplished by stressing the kind of collaboration that leads to independence. The tutors have recounted how their praise and positive reinforcement of the students’ writing bolstered the students’ confidence, making them feel good about themselves and their writing. They have also recorded how, in spite of their efforts to foster collaboration, they ride a fine line between mentor, authority figure, older sibling, and confidant(e). Yet, working from Freire’s premise—that learning is accomplished best when it is arranged in an egalitarian manner, not hierarchically—these writing workshops have brought about a critical consciousness for the participants.

So that we do not become “bankrupt,” we have to be prepared to tell our stories about why writing center pedagogies are, to quote Stock, “Designed . . . to support learners’ full participation in the social and intellectual practices that define the academy.” (24). Then we have to create more programs like the one I’ve described. In this way, we strengthen ourselves by changing and practicing as we and our students see fit. In so doing, we can effect the kind of change Schutz, Gere, and Herzberg write about in describing service learning and that Bruffee asserted we could bring about through practicing collaborative learning.

In fact, the ABLWW partnership has resulted in changes at Merrimack. We have a College-wide committee on Di-

versity and Community that will address why our Augustinian-sponsored, values-sensitive College is, in the main, pretty pale and pretty male. We have prepared a proposal for a Certificate in Community Engagement that one may earn by engaging in the kind of service-learning program I have described. We have developed a Writing Center where the director holds a full-time, tenure track position in the English Department, and conducts a training program that is more than an orientation to the tutoring of grammatical correctness; it treats what Rose says is needed in American education: "A philosophy of language and literacy that affirms the diverse sources of linguistic competence and deepens our understanding of the ways class and culture blind us to the richness of those sources. A perspective on failure that lays open the logic of error" (238).

Service learning as a form of writing center work demonstrates the value of

collaboration, for there is cognitive and social growth for the tutor and the student and program enhancement for their institutions. This narrative about the Andover /Bread Loaf/Merrimack College partnership shows why. The fact that writing centers are naturally suited for service learning programs that develop a social imagination for promoting constructive change shows that writing centers are not the next best thing to writing instruction or writing instructors, but the best next thing in education—period.

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## Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

March 5-6: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Little Rock, AR  
**Contact:** Sally Crisp, University Writing Center, Dept. of Rhetoric and Writing, U. of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2801 S. University, Little Rock, AR 72204; fax: 501-569-8279; e-mail: sccrisp@ualr.edu

March 20: Middle Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Dover, DE  
**Contact:** Renee Young, English Dept., Delaware State University, N. DuPont Hwy. Dover, DE 19904. For further information: <http://www.english.udel.edu/wc/mawca> (or) [ryoung@dsc.edu](mailto:ryoung@dsc.edu).

April 10: Northeast Writing Centers Association, in Lewiston, ME  
**Contact:** Theresa Ammirati, Dean of Freshmen, Connecticut College, 270 Mohegan Avenue, New London, CT 06320. E-mail: [tpamm@conncoll.edu](mailto:tpamm@conncoll.edu).

April 15-18: National Writing Centers Association, in Bloomington, IN  
**Contact:** Ray Smith, Campus Writing Program, Franklin 008, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405; phone: 812-855-4928; e-mail: [nwca99@indiana.edu](mailto:nwca99@indiana.edu); <http://www.indiana.edu/~nwca99>.

October 14-16: Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association, in Sante Fe, NM  
**Contact:** Jane Nelson, Director; University of Wyoming Writing Center; Coe Library; Laramie, WY 82072. E-mail: [jnelson@uwyo.edu](mailto:jnelson@uwyo.edu); fax: 307-766-4822

November 5-6: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in San Bernardino, CA  
**Contact:** Carol Peterson Haviland, English Dept., California State University, San Bernardino, 5500 Univ. Pkwy., San Bernardino, CA 92407; phone: 909-880 5833; fax: 909-880-7086; [cph@csusb.edu](mailto:cph@csusb.edu)

# Lifting a leaf from Muriel's pages: The benefits of publishing a high school writing center newsletter

I begin this article with apologies for my title, both for its length and for its informal reference to Muriel Harris. Nevertheless, I do feel obliged to acknowledge the woman who provided our inspiration. Her publication, *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, not only provided direction; it furnished a prototype which, for our center, dramatically turned theory into practice.

In order to become a peer tutor in our center, each writer earns the recommendation of an English teacher and volunteers to forfeit four mornings of his or her summer vacation for training in the non-directive conferring techniques advocated by Reigstad and MacAndrew, Harris, and others. When the school year begins, I am fully confident that my tutors are competent as writers. I am also certain that they understand the center's non-directive philosophy. However, I also know that the skills required for conferencing are not easily mastered. Successful conferencing demands much more than a list of guidelines and principles. Mostly, it demands carefully monitored practice.

Unlike tutors in college centers, our writing consultants earn no credit and receive no work/study grants for their services. All I can promise them for their assistance are extraordinary letters of recommendation for college and scholarship applications (as well as the steady supply of strawberry Twizzlers® we keep on hand for the clients). Nevertheless, as the center's director, I want to be able to quietly evaluate their sessions with other writers not only to determine how successful the exchanges are but also to offer

additional strategies for handling problems as they might occur.

Initially, I thought of having the tutors informally record their responses to conferences in journals along with some evaluation of how successful they deemed those conferences to be. I felt their journals might give me an idea of what went on during conferences I was not able to observe. That didn't work. Too often the sessions would end with the bell, the tutors barely having enough time to hear a client review final strategies for revision before they both had to gather up books and proceed to their next class. Even when the tutors did record a response, their entries were so brief that they prompted more questions than answers. Summaries of conferences appeared to be more affective and client-centered (what I tend to think of as the "touchy-feely" responses) than the introspective, reflective examinations I was hoping for.

Also because my tutors are chosen on the basis of interpersonal skills as much as their writing ability, they tend to be actively involved in a variety of sports and extra-curricular activities—basketball, track, band, student council, drama club, etc. I wanted an opportunity to touch base with them regularly, to find out how things were going with their own writing, as well as with their conferring, but requiring them to attend after-school meetings seemed impractical—not to mention an unfair imposition for the privilege of volunteering their time and services.

I had an additional motive for suggesting that a peer tutor newsletter

might resolve the problem of keeping in touch. In our high school, the English teachers include some of the most senior members of the faculty. Though they philosophically accept the idea of writing as process, they don't necessarily practice a process approach. Admittedly, our peer tutor program would disappear without their nominations; however, I wasn't sure that the majority of them had complete faith in our project. Few of them were referring any of their own students with an essay of literary analysis. Despite our assurances to the contrary, were they afraid my tutors might generate texts for our clients, "give away the answers," so to speak? And then, of course, there was the possibility that though every teacher could fully vouch for the writers whom he or she had nominated, each might also have misgivings about *the others*.

I had to find a way to allay their fears. The publication of a peer tutor newsletter would not only help me to convince the faculty that *all* my tutors were competent writers; it would help the writing center affirm and detail our non-directive philosophy. My fellow English teachers, through the tutors' own voices, would be assured that tutors never rewrite or proofread our clients' essays.

Then I began to consider whether expanding our audience beyond just the English teachers might have value. Including the administrators among our target audience would have the advantage of giving them a clear picture of what actually was going on in the writing center. They would see the variety of disciplines that were using writing

as an integral part of the curriculum. They would come to know some of the imaginative projects that teachers had developed. As the peer tutors mentioned specific assignments in articles they had written, such as a home economics class' authoring of children's picture books, the superintendent, principals, curriculum directors, and school board members would begin to appreciate the progress being achieved in demonstrating content mastery through writing. Tutors' articles also provided exactly the kind of concrete evidence that made it easier for school planners to justify the expense of computer technology.

So, what needs did publishing a writing center newsletter seem to satisfy? There were five that I considered important:

1. The newsletter afforded me the opportunity to discover just what was happening during the writing conferences.
2. It gave the tutors a chance to truly practice writing as process, including the final step of publication for a real and broader audience than myself.
3. It furnished dramatic evidence that the tutors were competent writers.
4. It served to reiterate our philosophy as a means of convincing the English teachers that they *need not fear* we were rewriting students' papers.
5. It provided administrators with a clearer picture of exactly what was going on in the center, as well as the concrete evidence that WAC was a concept teachers were beginning to embrace.

That was the rationale for starting the publication. We've been producing the *PT Quarterly* (an abbreviation for *Peer Tutor Quarterly*) for over seven years. It was designated as a quarterly because, initially, I had hoped to publish a newsletter at the end of every nine weeks. Unfortunately, as is sometimes the case with fevered inspirations, neither the tutors' nor my own energy-

levels could match our ambitions, so we usually ended up with just two or three publications throughout the year.

Like its prototype, our newsletter contains sixteen pages, though each page arranged horizontally divides legal-size paper to accommodate two pages. As is the case with most publications, the front page and the centerfold are reserved for especially insightful articles. On the first inside page, in addition to a table of contents that identifies each writer's contribution, I maintain a column called "A Teacher Takes Note." I began this column as an introduction to and reflection upon the value of the articles contained in each issue. I wanted to show my peer tutors how much I was learning from them. Occasionally, though, I have used it to comment on particular trends or to correct misconceptions of exactly what a peer tutor's role is or how it can most effectively be performed. For example, in one recent issue, many of the tutors complained that not enough students were taking advantage of their services. I couldn't help wondering if perhaps too many of them were waiting for a formal revision of a completed draft before offering their help. Their complaint gave me a chance to remind them that, as was the case in their writing for the *PTQ*, the right time for a conference often presents itself at an early stage in the writing process, especially prewriting and planning.

In fact, the most obvious benefit of publishing the tutors' articles is the opportunity it gives me to model conferencing techniques. We begin our conference sessions early in the writing process: testing topics, charting questions, discussing approaches, and examining plans. I might begin by asking, "How do you quickly establish rapport with your clients, make them feel comfortable, before you get onto the business of reviewing their pieces?" or "What was one problem that came up in the last conference that you felt unprepared to handle?" or "Is there one principle that you've learned

in your extra-curricular activities (track, football, drama) that also applies to conferencing? Could you detail that connection?"

The tutors must know how to get a writer started, and they learn that from discovering how to get started themselves. The newsletter also gives tutors a chance to respond to one another, eliminating the misconception that conferences are reserved for those with few writing skills. In the initial drafting stages, tutors compliment one another for the elements that are working, and they identify areas in need of clarification or elaboration. Throughout the process of composing, they are trading strategies that will prove useful in future conferences with clients. And as these articles begin to take shape, tutors also learn to borrow effective rhetorical techniques from one another.

Titles cover a broad range of topics. Certain ones stand out in my mind, like the article entitled "I'll Do It Later" in which Jason Boron transformed his own fine art of procrastination into a prewriting strategy which actually enabled his writing process. Courtney Falce wrote an article called "Avoiding the 'Big Brother' Syndrome" which detailed a personal experience of having her own big brother give her a less-than-helpful response to a short story. Describing the whole event as a "bad move," she was able to frame a wonderful metaphor that reinforced some very important advice to her fellow tutors. One of my former tutors even recounted his own embarrassing story of becoming too actively involved in the revision of a client's paper. He titled his piece, "Oops, My Mistake!"

Because he was working with a client who was not comfortable using the computer, my technically-superior tutor had decided *to demonstrate* how to use the cut and paste option, rather than *to explain* how it was done. In short, he somehow slipped down to "Select All" before cutting, then, in a panic, "Quit" the document, *forgetting* that he did not want to save that blank



page. Within a fraction of a second, the flustered tutor had completely wiped out all of the client's work. Nothing I have ever done in my training session has dramatized the non-directive principles of "The writer talks, the tutor listens: The writer, not the tutor, performs" (Broglie 3) more than his story. As a result of being encouraged to examine this failed conference, one very contrite tutor developed a strategy to avoid ever committing the same mistake again. From that day on, any and all conferences at a computer proceeded safely, with both hands hidden deep inside his pockets.

In addition to personal narratives about conferences, the tutors also write reviews of software, examine the application of training principles, analyze their own writing processes. They discuss ethical issues like the problem of plagiarism, and they offer one another hints on turning their writing talents to profit in the scramble for scholarship monies. They tell stories, write poems, and experiment with language.

Another tutor, a creative writer and poet, wanted to remind us of the importance of adjusting our critical stance when responding to poetry. In doing so, he invented an imaginative persona, "Norman the Hedgehog, Ph.D.," a pompous and prickly professor of English. Working from a drawing of this cartoon character, he proceeded to imaginatively present a scenario of the "distinguished guest" performing a professional lecture on "The Perils of Responding to Poetry." The piece, replete with verbosity and sarcasm, was thereby able to cleverly outline some useful considerations, while at the same time avoid sounding pedantic. Beyond what it had to say about responding to poetry, the article perfectly illustrated something we English teachers have been trying to communicate for centuries: Exposition need not be void of humor to inform. The response to the article was overwhelming, and a young writer's developing instincts were solidly confirmed.

Through this article and others like it, I began to see my tutors using their writing to learn. The prospect of producing a piece for publication essentially forced them to criticize, to evaluate and to explore. Regardless of whether they began with pencils, pens or keyboards, they were beginning to offer one another the knowledge that each of them had purchased through experience—and like all good writers, they were beginning to take risks.

Further, articles like those mentioned above began to demonstrate exactly the types of reflective and introspective examinations that had been conspicuously absent in each tutor's journal. In producing their pieces, tutors could not help but measure their experiences in terms of critical questions that served to define these experiences. Isn't it ironic that in the most common opportunities for publication in high schools—newspapers and literary magazines—we seldom provide a forum that really affords writers a chance to publish and share their perspectives on what and how they learn?

The informal tone of our "semi-professional journal," which took a little time for some English teachers to accept, encourages the authors to experiment in a way not usually permitted in more formal academic writing—eschewing the third person imperative, for example, or manipulating traditionally taboo constructions for effect. Of course, in producing the newsletter, in cases where clarity suffers, I don the editor's cap and very directly advise changes; however, the writers are nevertheless permitted a great deal of freedom. And they thrive on it. As authors, they have the ultimate authority over their texts, deciding when and where it is appropriate to break a rule.

In an article entitled "Center Newsletter Promotes Growth," Melanie Sonnenborn, demonstrates this point:

"While we learn to appreciate the input of others, we also learn to assert our own authority as writers.

While suggestions are helpful and

useful, they are not mandates. Every writer must decide where to draw the line—where his or her own style must stand above the ideas of others. . . .

[W]hen Marsha was working on her article . . . , she asserted the writer's right to manipulate the language to get an effect. She followed this with a fragment. Even though it was obvious that this structure was a fragment by design, many of those who read over her article did not believe that such a thing could be O.K.

[T]hey felt that a fragment is a fragment is a fragment. And therefore wrong! Despite the criticism, Marsha stuck with her original version. The result was effective, and more importantly, her own." (June 5, 1991: 1)

This practice arises from my hope that if the tutors are permitted to experiment with breaking the rules, they might just examine with a little more respect the works of their less experienced peers. So far, I haven't been disappointed. Consequently, the less formal tone of the publication helps us to build a community of writers who also tend to be much less judgmental, which, after all, is exactly the objective.

As far as I was concerned, the newsletter's potential was clear:

1. It gave me, as the director of the center, a chance to model conferring techniques at every stage of the writing process.
2. It eliminated the misconception that conferences are reserved for the weakest writers.
3. It gave tutors an opportunity to test and learn conferring strategies on one another, as well as from the director.
4. The tutors' writing continued to improve as they began borrowing effective rhetorical techniques from one another.
5. The tutors gained a forum where they were encouraged to take risks.
6. The tutors earned membership

into a community of writers who tended to be much less judgmental.

But these were my perceptions. I wanted to find out what former peer tutors, some now college graduates, might have to say. I went back to old files and ferreted out new addresses for approximately twenty of my former tutors. I sent surveys soliciting their input for this article, specifically asking them if they felt publishing these articles had had an impact. From their point of view, the benefits of producing a newsletter were as follows:

- Eric Newman gained a sense of audience:

“It was difficult to make a transition from writing papers for a teacher to see, to writing articles intended for public distribution. I figured my articles had to be masterpieces. . . . I had always been hesitant to change the structure of an article, or to take out anything more than a sentence or so. Yet the first draft of a piece is rarely in ‘prime’ form, and learning to part with sections of it is a useful skill.”

- Kevin Murphy applauded the freedom:

“I found that when confronted with an extracurricular, voluntary project like the *PTQ*, I loosen my iron grip on the pen and let my ‘writing muscles’ exercise at leisure.”

- Liz Mannion learned to accept responsibility for herself as a writer:

“Mrs. Broglie forced me to analyze and change my work first by myself.”

- Kristie Wicker saw the newsletter as a record of progress, as well as a motivator:

“It allowed me to see my improvements as a writer as well as the areas I needed to work on. It allowed me to continue to grow and improve as a writer. It gave me motivation to keep working. . . . It was going to be in a newsletter. That’s an achievement for a young writer.”

- Jason Boron gained poise:  
“I became more confident in the way I write. It also made me demand more of myself when it came to writing.”

- But perhaps the best comment came from Amy Maraney:  
“I learned patience in writing. It takes a long time to crank out quality work. You can’t just dash it out.”

These responses confirmed what I had already suspected. The publication of a high school writing center newsletter has very real benefits not only for the center and its director but also for the peer tutors.

In conclusion, the publication supports the goals of the center because it gives the director a chance to keep the non-directive conferencing strategy alive and well. Through the experiences the writers describe, the director creates the occasion to monitor and adjust the tutor’s techniques and to extend those techniques to every stage in the writing process. Through their articles in the newsletter, the writers continue to grow and to improve by performing for an authentic audience.

The publication also provides the peer tutors with a genuine medium for the codification and exchange of ideas. It’s a forum through which they can begin to celebrate their successes and analyze their failures; it’s a vehicle through which they can collect and compare their own research in an effort to discover meaning; it’s a symposium in which they can accumulate and dispense a growing body of useful information.

But finally, and perhaps more importantly, it’s a tribute to a prototype which proudly promotes the idea of communicating, one-to-one another.

Mary Broglie  
Bethel Park Senior High School  
Bethel Park, PA

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## Call for Papers

Seeking papers for new volume addressing discipline/program formation and composition theories from a new angle: “writing center work.” The idea for the collection, *Theorizing Writing Center Practice and Revitalizing English Studies*, comes out of issues addressed at the MLA’s first panel on writing centers in December 1998. Suggested topics can include (but are not limited to): revitalizing literacy work through student interactions occurring in the academy but outside of disciplines or set curriculum; reconfiguring literary, composition, cultural, rhetorical theory through student-centered interactions; writing programs reconstructed around writing center activities. Articles should explore how writing center theory transforms writing program realities and how writing center practice creates disciplinary theory, rather than the other way around.

Please submit two copies of 500-1000 word abstracts/bibliographies to: Jessica Yood, “Writing Center Volume” Writing Program, SUNY Stony Brook, 196 Humanities, Stony Brook, NY 11794-5340. Queries: jyood@aol.com. Deadline for Abstracts: May 30, 1999. Deadline for full-length chapters: September 30, 1999.

# TUTORS' COLUMN

## The easy conferences are the toughest: A reconsideration of Christina Murphy's "Freud in the Writing Center"

I hurriedly ran into the Writing Center Friday afternoon. It was 12:05 p.m., and I was late for my shift. A small, blond-haired girl was sitting on the couch clutching a paper. She smiled at me as I set down my coat.

"Did you need a conference?" I asked, sitting next to her.

"Yep. I'm working on a paper for my Reading Literature class. It's about a personal experience that changed my life. We're supposed to have someone from the Writing Center read it for us."

I relaxed and settled back on the couch. Conferences on personal essays are the ones I feel most comfortable holding. With these essays, I do not need to worry about understanding the subject matter. If I am confused or have questions about the text, the author is sitting next to me. Feeling confident, I took the paper from her outstretched hand.

The first two paragraphs described a sleepover that the writer had attended last year at a friend's house. She and her two best friends were doing typical teenager things like eating junk food and watching movies with hot guys. The paper was only two pages long, and this introductory material occupied the entire first page. I kept wondering when the life altering event happened.

At the bottom of the first page, she wrote that the three of them got into the car to pick up another friend. As they pulled out of the driveway, a

drunk driver slammed into their car. All three girls were sitting close together in the front seat, and the impact of the accident caused her two friends to hit each other, crushing their skulls. They died instantly. As the car went up in flames, the student writer had to crawl over the bodies of her friends to escape. When she got out, she saw the drunk driver smoking a cigarette, watching the scene.

As I read this description, I felt physically ill, and tears welled up in my eyes. I am a compassionate person, and reading this paper struck every sympathetic chord in my body. Despite the power of her draft, the whole story was told in just under two pages, leaving considerable room for development. I wanted descriptions of the girls' personalities and their physical appearances along with vivid images of the accident. I wanted to know what the student felt like during and after the accident. How had she changed? Were her other friendships stronger now, or had they suffered as well? There was so much more I wanted to know.

In the midst of these thoughts, I looked at the girl. Even though she was sitting down, wearing a big winter coat, I could tell she had a small frame and probably stood around five feet. I could only think about how she looked like a child, an innocent child with a naive outlook on life. I wanted to switch into my psychologist mode and be more of a counselor than a writing consultant. I knew that was not the role I was supposed to play, so I tried to set my

emotions aside and focus on the task at hand.

I was cautious with my suggestions at first, feeling out her responses. If she had come to the Writing Center of her own free will, instead of to fulfill a requirement, I would have been less hesitant in my approach. In Christina Murphy's article "Freud in the Writing Center: The Psychoanalytics of Tutoring Well," she writes, "students come to a writing center for one reason only—they want help with their writing" (43). In the situation being discussed, however, coming to the Writing Center was part of the professor's assignment. This arrangement is often helpful in introducing new students to the Writing Center, but unfortunately, it sometimes brings in writers whose needs may be best served elsewhere.

To begin the conference, I asked her what she missed most about her friends. I thought that if we talked informally about the subject, she might open up and feel more comfortable. I was wrong. In answer to my question, her body noticeably tensed up, and in a quiet voice, she said, "I miss everything about them," and nothing more. I realized that the conference was not going to be a success if I had to force her to tell me those details which so desperately belonged in the essay. But then, I reasoned silently, maybe I did not have to know the details. They needed to be incorporated into the essay, but that did not require her explaining them to me as well.

I decided to change my approach. I began offering her general suggestions that did not need specific answers on her part, my attention shifting from the writer to the paper. We began to adopt the roles of instructor and student: she listened and took notes while I gave an impromptu lecture. Usually I avoid this sort of conference because I have found that equal interaction between the writer and the consultant yields the best results. With conferences on emotionally troubling topics, however, this is not always the case. In the conference described above, the instructor/student approach was the only way I could effectively communicate suggestions to the writer. Does a student's emotional involvement in personal writing sometimes command that we change our methods of conferencing so that we do not overstep the writer's boundaries of comfort?

Murphy writes that "While the teacher's role is primarily informative and focused on the method of presentation that will best convey the instruction to the class as a whole, the tutor's role often is primarily supportive and affective, secondarily instructional, and always directed to each student as an individual in a unique, one-to-one interpersonal relationship" (43-44). Although this statement has merit, maintaining a supportive student/tutor relationship in conferences on personal writing may require amending Murphy's advice. Murphy makes the important point that each student who comes to the Writing Center has unique needs that must be assessed and considered. However, depending upon the degree of intimacy in the paper, the writer may feel most comfortable with a more passive role, requiring less vulnerability. In my conference, I reversed Murphy's order of tutorial duties because I felt that as an instructor I would better serve the student.

Holding conferences on personal writing challenges the consultant to be

flexible in her method of interacting with the writer. Since a main goal of a conference is to help the student improve the paper, the consultant must establish a relationship with the writer that enables this to be accomplished. Murphy quotes Truax and Carkhuff's *Toward Effective Counseling and Psychotherapy*, "the person (whether a counselor, therapist, or teacher) who is better able to communicate warmth, genuineness, and accurate empathy is more effective in interpersonal relationships no matter what the goal of interaction" (45). Therefore, the tutor's first task in consulting personal writing is to assess the type of interpersonal relationship she thinks suits the needs of the writer. The consultant must combine her perceptions of the writer with certain qualities that Murphy identifies as essential to good tutoring. These are defined as "basic interest, concern, a desire to help, . . . and empathetic understanding" (44). By exhibiting these qualities, a good consultant will be sensitive to the type of conference that would most benefit the student.

For some emotional papers, the writer might initially be looking for a therapy session, enabling her to talk about her experiences rather than discussing the paper. In this situation the consultant must communicate with warmth and empathy, establishing a non-threatening environment where the writer feels free to share her problems. If the writer can convey her ideas, the productivity of the conference will increase. However, writing consultants are not equipped or trained to deal with the problems of seriously troubled students. In such cases, the consultant should feel free to refer the student to other professional student services.

As in the case of my conference, however, the writer might not desire or be comfortable with any examination of the paper's topic, suggesting that the consultant should work on the plane of an instructor rather than a confidante.

Murphy compares the tutor/student relationship with the therapist/client relationship by saying that both the student and the client are "hurting" in some way. Usually the student is "hurting" because she suffers "a high degree of inhibiting anxiety associated with the process of writing" (44). This may have been a factor in this conference, but more than anything the writer was hurting from the painful loss of two close friends. This writer was not looking to me as a therapist, but neither was she emotionally capable of separating herself from the paper and discussing its content.

In addition to these considerations, the consultant must be conscious of her own affective reaction to the paper and decide whether sharing this emotional response will help or hinder the conference. If the consultant disapproves of the writer's personal opinions, for example, she might remain silent and remember that the writer is not asking for approval, only suggestions for improving the writing. On the other hand, it sometimes proves beneficial for the consultant to share how the paper affected her, since this can spark discussion and enrich the writer's work. Whether the consultant's reaction to the paper is positive or negative, the consultant must communicate in a helpful, non-threatening manner. The writer may perceive the consultant's involvement with the ideas in the paper and therefore be more willing to take an active role in the conference. In my conference, however, I needed to control my feelings. Telling the student how much her paper disturbed and saddened me would have removed some of the professional distance, most likely making the student more uncomfortable.

Conferences on personal writing demand more attention from the consultant because so many powerful variables need to be figured into the equation. The consultant is faced with

the challenges of controlling her own reactions to the piece, reading the personality and motives of the writer, and adjusting her approach accordingly. The challenge is further aggravated because this entire assessment must

take place within the first few minutes of the conference.

Kristie Speirs  
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Coe College  
Cedar Rapids, IA

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## Asking for confidence

In most tutoring situations, students seldom think of the tutor as one who builds confidence. Students see the tutor as one who "knows all." As tutors, we know not only that this is not true, but also that this "knows all" method of tutoring is problematic. If a tutor approaches a student with an authoritarian persona, the student will probably expect to be told what to do. This is a bad first step. No student wants to feel intimidated. Intimidation makes one discouraged, which is exactly what a tutor wants to avoid. In order to build confidence in students then, tutors must construct questions to draw their ideas out, and then offer suggestions that encourage what the student has expressed. Every student makes personal decisions when constructing a piece of writing. Therefore, every student needs encouragement for their ideas so they can build confidence in their skills as writers. Once confidence is instilled, the student will likely feel the strength they possess and be able to utilize that strength on paper.

For example, an intimidated middle-aged woman came to me last winter with a dilemma in her philosophy class. The assignment was to prove a statement on the assignment sheet by finding proof from the class text book. However, the student could not find the information to support the professor's statement. She explained that she had studied all of the information and simply could not find necessary proof, and I believed her. She looked hopeless and distraught.

"What's your proof for the assignment?" I asked.

"I've told you. I couldn't find proof," she said.

"I know, I know. But what do you think your classmates have found? More so, why do you think that you're wrong?" I began, thinking to myself that she did have the right answer. I needed to encourage her to feel that way also. She thought the work she had done was insubstantial.

"Write the paper on the basis of what you've found, on the proof you've discovered. Yeah, so you haven't found enough proof to back up the statement. Who's to say that what you've found isn't the exact purpose of the assignment?"

During a pause, the woman thought about what I had just said. "I guess I never thought of that," she said calmly as the color in her face began to replenish. I could tell that she wanted to say something, yet she was frozen by the realization that she had not trusted herself. Simultaneously, there was a sense of epiphany in her look because now she had something to write.

"You know, I never thought of that," she added again after the brief silence. "I never figured that I was right. But now that I think about it, I know that this is what I've been really wanting to do. Wow, that really helps."

During the session, I realized that I had told her to write her thoughts, to trust herself. First, I formed questions to bring out her ideas, then I offered suggestions as a way of encouraging her to structure them in her paper. This stage of encouragement felt most significant to me because I knew that the student had gained some confidence in herself.

Often when I am tutoring someone with an interpretation assignment, that person wants me to help them by offering my own ideas. It is something I've come to interpret as either a lack of confidence or lack of thought on the student's part. For instance, a session I had with a student in a literary analysis course reminded me of the significance of instilling confidence into the writer. In this case, the assignment was to analyze a poem. During our session, the student relentlessly insisted on asking me, "What do you think of this line?" And, "What do you think that means?" I felt as if she wanted me to take the poem home and analyze it for her. But I knew she could not gain any confidence by wondering what I thought, nor could she write the paper on the basis of my ideas. I needed to ask her about her interpretations more than I had been. So I started from the top and asked her what she thought the poem meant. I pushed the page in front of her.

"I don't know. It's about survival, but then there's other stuff too," she replied reluctantly.

“O.K., good. So who’s surviving?” I asked insistently.

“This African-American woman.”

“What is she surviving against?” I instigated.

“She’s talking about staying alive or living without repression in a prejudiced world, a hostile world. She’s upset and wants to be set free.”

“Whoa, you know a lot,” I responded with a surprised expression. “So what do you think these two lines here are expressing?” I added, pointing to the first two lines of the second stanza. Now more interested in what she herself had to contribute, the student began to explain what these words meant to her. I nodded and smiled at each idea she expressed. She began writing these ideas down, and before she knew what happened, she was expressing herself with confidence. She wrote rapidly. I could see and sense the trust she had found in herself through her body language. It appeared clearly to me that she had the confidence to write.

Like this woman, students who must construct an argument from their point of view have to be tutored in a way that encourages their ideas. From argument essays to research papers, students are responsible for writing according to their personal thoughts on a subject. Therefore, the ultimate significance resides in just how much students base their arguments on their own ideas. At times, students choose to borrow someone’s opinion out of the conscientious feeling that their own ideas are inferior. For instance, a student came into the writing center this year, asking for help starting a research paper. He was frightened by the word “thesis” and intimidated by the work involved for such an assignment. He had done some research, I found, yet had not formulated an argument, nor done any writing at all. My plan was to ask him questions to reveal what he had been considering for the paper.

“Have you decided what you want to write about?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” he responded, shuffling through his notes bashfully.

“Well, what do you think of the issue personally? Are you for or against guns?” I asked, leaning my head into his gaze to draw his full attention.

After a brief hesitation, he said, “I’m kind of both.”

“O.K. Then tell me why you think they’re bad.”

He waited, looked at me, then back at his notes. Sitting there, I was slightly impatient, trying to speed up his response. I made the mistake of offering my opinion to try and draw an argument back from him. “Personally,” I started, “I don’t think guns should be legal at all. Maybe hunters are using them for reasons that seem viable because a human is not being killed. But even still, I think it’s a sport that can be eliminated for the sake of humanity.”

Looking at me, he began to speak and nod his head. “Yeah, I think that’s a good point.” After slowing down the motion of his head, he fell into a reflective state for a moment. Then he pulled out a blank sheet of paper. “What were you saying about what was good for humanity?”

Quickly realizing that he wanted to use my opinion, I made a move to deter him from doing so. “No, no. You need to think about what you really think, about your life in relation to guns. What has your experience told you? Forget about what I said. How do you feel about guns?”

“I know that guns shouldn’t belong on the street,” he said flatly.

“O.K., good. So what do you think should be done about that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they could make laws that prevent people from owning guns, I mean, like hand guns and stuff,” he said, pulling imaginary hand guns to articulate himself. “Unless you’re of a certain age, like older than twenty-five,” he continued, his eyes now directed towards me instead of his notes.

Moving on, I threw more questions at him for every vague statement he made, nodding with noticeable interest at each of his opinions. Gradually, he began to develop his own argument, encouraged by my gesture of acknowledgment. In the end, he had an argument to prove, and the necessary confidence to write his paper. All I did was show my support and encouragement for his ideas. I learned the importance of putting together questions to induce his ideas and offering the necessary suggestions to build confidence in what he had to say.

As tutors, we must show that each writer’s ideas are significant. We have the power to encourage students to express their thoughts by asking questions, gearing towards suggestions that will build confidence in their expression. When we build strength in students’ abilities to express themselves, we are tutoring.

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University of Nevada—Reno  
Reno, Nevada  
(formerly at U. of Michigan—Flint  
Flint, Michigan)

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## NWCA News

(cont. from page 15)  
conferences, NCTE’s leadership consider taking the conference to other locations where affordable housing is available.

I will summarize any NCTE response to this issue in this column and at NWCA Board meetings. . . . . Once more to the coffeepot in an attempt to warm my southern soul.

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## NWCA News from Eric Hobson, President

As I mentioned in my December column, writing a news article 6-8 weeks before its publication date is disconcerting. Temperatures in Albany, NY today (January 30, 1999) peaked at 14 degrees and snow has fallen steadily since morning. Yet, to keep the writing center community informed about things relevant to their interests, I must locate my thoughts six weeks into the future and think about such topics as the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) meeting in Atlanta. Raised in Georgia, however, mid-March means Spring has arrived, flowers have started blooming and leaves are appearing to join the pansies that are able to thrive during most of a Georgia winter and the pine trees that keep that part of the country in perpetual green hues. My Albany colleagues cheerily tell me that I'll just love Spring in New England—meaning late April.

### The CCCC Conference, Atlanta, GA, (March 24-27, 1999)

The CCCC convention promises to be educational, rewarding, and fun. The conference program will tempt us all with more options than we can possibly sample. The zealous and carefully scheduled among us will rush from room to room and manage to hear an astounding number of presentations. Others will move with equal purpose, but at a different pace, and see/hear everything they marked in their program guide. Those of us with less fortitude will give it a try, then get waylaid in the exhibits hall by old friends and retire to calmer realms for the kinds of talk about nothing in particular, families, projects, etc. that keep us engaged with our professional lives.

The pre-convention program is highlighted by an all-day writing center workshop, chaired again this year by Neal Lerner, NWCA Treasurer, and his dappled band of willing and resource-

ful writing center directors. The convention program itself offers enough writing centerish sessions that one could keep busy during the entire conference going to these sessions alone. And, given the many writing center books published in the past two years, the exhibits hall will beckon.

As in past years, the National Writing Centers Association will host its Special Interest Group (SIG) session at 6 p.m., Friday, March 28, in the Board Room. A cash bar will be set up at 6:30 p.m., and the session will start at 6:45. Michael Pemberton, NWCA Vice President, will chair the session focusing on writing center research—an extension of a discussion started at last year's conference. I anxiously await the comments of my fellow presenters during this session, Nancy Grimm and Beth Boquet. Likewise, I look forward to presenting this year's NWCA Research Awards for best article and book to very deserving colleagues. Please make a point of attending this energetic session. Like last year, the cash bar will be available before and during the session, so come early, unwind from a busy conference day, and socialize with old and new friends alike.

Following the SIG session, the NWCA Board will meet and all interested members of the writing center community are welcomed to attend. Because the NWCA Board will meet again at the National Writing Centers Conference in April, as President, I promise to keep the CCCC meeting short and productive. The gist of business at this meeting will be to take care of a number of issues hanging from previous meetings and to pull together other developing projects and issues for action at the April meeting. Regional affiliate organizations are encouraged to report on their activities during this board meeting. And, if you

are in need of amiable dinner companions that night, the traditional post-board meeting migration to dinner and attendant post-dinner activities will occur about 8 p.m.

### NWCA Initiatives

The NWCA SIG session will serve as the forum for announcing the details of a much discussed and important NWCA initiative related to research. With the unanimous support of the NWCA Board, \$1,500.00 has been earmarked for grants to support research projects related directly to issues affecting writing centers. A committee of board members has articulated the mission and focus of this research grant, established the application and selection procedures, and delineated recipient responsibilities. We hope to supplement these first funds through assorted fund-raising activities.

**FYI:** A number of colleagues have contacted me during the past three months to express their concern over the hotel rates for rooms at the two CCCC conference hotels (the majority of rooms cost @ \$170.00 per night, plus applicable taxes.). With the support of the NWCA Board, I have written NCTE to express the National Writing Center Association's concern that such room rates prohibit many members of the writing center and composition community from attending this important conference. The letter acknowledges that there is probably little that they can do in terms of rates negotiated for already determined conference sites. However, I ask NCTE to expand the number and range of "official" conference hotels at these sites to include moderately priced options, including a sufficient number of reserved rooms to make such accommodations a viable option for attendees. Additionally, I suggest that if convention hotels in major cities will not negotiate moderately priced room rates for future

(cont. on page 14)

## Writing Center Position Nassau Community College

Non-Classroom faculty member (12-month) for an innovative Writing Center serving 250 students per week. Duties include individual/group tutoring, administrative duties, faculty development, and one evening per week supervision. Qualifications: Commitment to writing center work and theory, M. A. in Composition, Rhetoric, English or directly related discipline required, Ph.D. preferred, two years of teaching college composition (Ph.D. will substitute for one year) or in a college writing center with a wide range of stu-

dents. Experience in one of the following required: WAC, ESL, LD, or especially CAI. Salary: \$41,894

Please send CV, cover letter to REPLY BOX 12, post-marked no later than March 5 to: Mr. Harold Bellinger, Assistant to the President for Affirmative Action and Diversity, Nassau Community College, One Education Drive, Garden City, NY 11530-6793. For additional information about the school, visit the website at [www.sunynassau.edu/general/employ/employ/html](http://www.sunynassau.edu/general/employ/employ/html).

## Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association

Call for Proposals  
Santa Fe, New Mexico  
Oct. 14-16, 1999

The RMWCA meets in conjunction with RMMLA. Visit the RMMLA website for information about the hotel and conference details: <http://rmmla.wsu.edu/rmmla/> Proposals are invited on all aspects of writing center work. Typically, proposals are accepted for 20-minute presentations, but alternative formats are welcome. For instance, you can propose a full panel for a 60-80 minute presentation. Submit proposals by e-mail, fax, or snail mail to: Jane Nelson, President RMWCA, e-mail: [jnelson@uwyo.edu](mailto:jnelson@uwyo.edu); fax: 307-766-4822. Snail mail: Jane Nelson, Director; University of Wyoming Writing Center; Coe Library; Laramie, WY 82072 Deadline for proposals: March 10, 1999.

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