

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 24, Number 10

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing June, 2000

...FROM THE EDITOR...

As we gather data for our yearly reports, clean up our desks—and the remains of our end-of-semester parties—and make some vacation plans, this issue of the newsletter brings Volume 24 to a close. Because we begin our 25th year of publication in September, it would be an appropriate time to collect stories of our history. I invite those of you who have been involved with writing centers for many years to recall some of those stories and to reflect on how and when we organized ourselves, grew as a field.

As I invite you to look backward, this month's issue helps us look forward as Al DeCiccio reflects on how we must retain our institutional relevance, an issue addressed, in part, by Craig Magee in his essay reporting on successful assessment of his new center in the United Arab Emirates. And reviewers of Nancy Grimm's *Good Intentions* examine her recommendations for writing centers in a postmodern world.

I also invite you to send in more Quotable Tutor Quotes (see pp. 12, 16). Have a gloriously relaxing summer, everyone, and I look forward to welcoming you back in September.

• Muriel Harris, editor

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Outsourcing writing center work: The view from the administration

Privatizing education

"Thanks for the copy of *The Writing Center Journal*. I never knew such a forum existed, nor did I know about the National Writing Centers Association." —A new College Writing Program and Writing Center Director

"Call 1-800-KAP-TEST!" — Boston Radio Ad

"She likes to tell the story of how her son improved 400 points after having gone to Kaplan. Maybe we need to help our students in the same way." —A college president in response to proposed college initiatives to assist students preparing to take the Massachusetts Educator Certification Test

"When can you contract a crew to clean our Residence Hall?" —A college Vice President of Finance and Administration to the Head of Facilities and Maintenance

"Aim high! Kaplan services." — Bulletin board on Green Line of MBTA

“Having trouble hitting your target?
We can help in SAT—ACT—
PSAT—TOEFL—GRE—
GMAT—LSAT.”—The Kenoza
Learning & Test Preparation
Center

“Discover how one school *tripled* its
test scores.”—AGS test prepara-
tion solutions help all your
students succeed

Caveats

In a 1996 *Writing Lab Newsletter* ar-
ticle, former NWCA President, Jeanne

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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, announce-
ments, comments, queries, and yearly
subscription payments to the editor.

Simpson, anticipated what the above realities show: Proprietary education is upon us, while, at the same time, higher education is outsourcing everything from facilities management to test preparation. Can writing centers—she seems to be asking—be far behind? “Already,” Simpson wrote almost three years ago, “universities and colleges are looking at ways to contract out services they can no longer afford to develop and support internally. Some . . . are looking at using commercial access to the Internet, because the cost of sustaining up-to-date equipment is beyond their reach, especially now that every institution I know of is struggling with lean, even malnourished budgets. Contracted food service [and maintenance service] has been around for years” (2).

In December, 1998, the College Board produced and the PBS Adult Learning Service presented “The Privatization of Higher Education,” a program that featured Ronald Taylor, President and CEO of DeVry, Inc., Carol Aslanian, Director, Office of Adult Learning Services, The College Board, Sylvan Learning Centers, and Corporate Universities. Below is the advertisement announcing this event:

According to Wall Street analysts, private education companies represent one of the fastest emerging growth areas of the economy. Today, they account for only about two percent of the \$211 billion spent annually on higher education. But in coming decades, proprietary postsecondary education is expected to grow to *15-20 percent* of the total! Representative of the trend are for-profit companies such as the Apollo Group, which operates the University of Phoenix, and DeVry, Inc., which runs the DeVry Institutes of Technology.

Meanwhile, other private corporations are now working in partnership with colleges by making funds available for training in critically needed areas. Leading

the field are software giants like Microsoft and Oracle that need highly skilled workers. They make substantial investments in specific programs carried out by educational institutions to ensure that a pool of qualified workers will be available for their industry. (The Public Broadcasting Service 1998)

The program focused on three recent articles. One of these is Ted Marchese's “Not-So-Distant Competitors.” In the piece, this AAHE Vice President warns that “Quite suddenly, in just two or three years, American higher education has come face-to-face with an explosive array of new competitors” (www.aahe.org/bulletin/bull_1may98.htm). A second article is written by AACC Board of Directors chair-elect, Tony Zeiss. His cover story for June/July 1998 issue of the *Community College Journal* is entitled “The Realities of Competition: Will Our Students Become Theirs?” While you read Zeiss' warning, think about whether or not it is far-fetched to substitute writing centers for community colleges:

By any comparison to other education models, America's community colleges have been uncommonly successful. Unfortunately, complacency or arrogance too often follows success. As the proverbial underdogs in funding support, community colleges can hardly be called arrogant, yet they may assume a mantle of complacency. It is this complacency that threatens the future and perhaps the very existence of community colleges. If we don't meet the needs and expectations of students, the for-profit colleges and training organizations certainly will; indeed they already have the jump on us. Yes, there is competition for community colleges, and it's spelled with a capital ‘P’ for proprietary colleges. (www.pbs.org/als/programs/live/ccj.htm)

The third article, by Arthur Levine, treats the popularity of for-profit institutions. “Students,” states Levine, “in-

creasingly are bringing to higher education exactly the same consumer expectations they have for every other commercial establishment. . . . Their focus is on convenience, quality, service, and cost.”

Vigilance

In “Writing Centers in Times of Whitewater,” Lester Faigley tells why students are increasingly leaving our colleges and universities and therefore are fair game for proprietary colleges:

Universities . . . remain deeply traditional in their structure. They are divided into discrete areas of specialization called departments, and they are governed hierarchically. They expect to keep their faculties in place for many years and guarantee this stability with the system of tenure. They are designed to reproduce themselves by granting degrees according to their departmental structure. This system worked well in the stable postwar industrial economy which grew incrementally; it is not working well in a postindustrial economy. The problem lies not in graduates being turned out in the wrong fields but in the basic assumption of a college degree leading to steady employment. The traditional structure of a university, like that of a traditional factory, has become increasingly anachronistic. (13)

This anachronistic model has served many of us very well, and it is a model for which I have a great deal of affection. However, I must point out the possibility that the model has entropied; the resulting malaise or complacency could be problematic for the traditional professorate.

Indeed, in order to be more efficient, effective, and accountable, college and university administrations have been about the business of making internal reallocations. For those who work in the writing center, this continues to mean conflating resources having to do with providing support to students per-

ceived to be in need: second language support, reading and writing support, mathematics, technology, and science support, and support for the learning and physically disabled. Academic support service centers now house all of these support services, and the question of expertise has become even trickier for writing center workers to negotiate.

While this administrative move means that many centers have had to come to terms with being mainstreamed, some centers have resisted, preferring to stay on the margins and uphold the so-called “idea” of a writing center. In either case, writing centers must be vigilant these days because in the name of efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability, it is not hard to imagine administrators strategizing the ways to outsource this work as has already been done with food service, maintenance, and, yes, if we think about the advertisements companies such as Sylvan and Kaplan have placed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, even developmental writing. Indeed, because administrations are asked to be fiscally prudent, entrepreneurs are assiduously looking for ways to make their products useful (and cost-effective) when compared to colleges and universities.

The dangers to writing centers are palpable. There are increasing reports of writing centers being eliminated. (Consider the example of General College at the University of Minnesota. We lost a former editor of *The Writing Center Journal*, and a frequent contributor to our field. And what happens to the center where the director says that he did not even know such an organization as the National Writing Centers Association or publications as *The Writing Center Journal* and *The Writing Lab Newsletter* exist?) The future of writing centers is even muddier when one considers that an administration will be able to report on how the delivery of the same services can be rendered more quickly and effectively

by outsourcing those services. Moreover, the savings may make it possible for that same administration to provide compensation increases, much-needed faculty development support, and even course-load adjustments and reductions. Indeed, it may be difficult to support the traditional position of those who believe in the “idea” of a writing center in the face of this model that can give results to trustees, cut back on expenses, and deliver more to the academic community.

Writing centered in the academy

According to Patricia Stock, writing centers can be the place in the academy where genuine learning takes place, where learning is student-centered, and where a healthy learning environment is provided (7-29). And Faigley writes, “writing centers should and must take a leadership role—*should* for the good of the institution and *must* for their own continuing development” (16). To take this leadership role, Faigley recommends that the writing center should become assertive in having the community recognize its professionalism. Indeed, this is what Simpson recommended in 1996: In discussing writing tutors, Simpson wrote, “Sylvan tutors are evaluated on results, hard numbers: how many people do they get to an acceptable level of mastery within X amount of time? It is a crude and ruthless measure of quality, one I imagine any of us would resist. The best way to resist this kind of evaluative standard imposed on us is to establish our own. We must do this quickly We need to start writing job descriptions for our tutors as well as ourselves. We need to set up systems of evaluating their performance (and our own) against those descriptions, systems that include a predictable schedule and that include clear feedback about strengths and weaknesses and plans for improvement. We need to establish methods and materials by which we will evaluate. And then we need to do the evaluating and live by the results” (3). Writing center workers must establish the standards and then

conduct on-going assessment to determine how well they are meeting those standards. Simpson also writes that another “recommendation for improving our professionalism is a big one: it is time to develop a system of accreditation for writing centers” (4).

Regarding this point, you should know that the idea of accreditation (or assessment) begun by Joe Law, Barry Maid, and Jeanne Simpson and picked up by Jo Koster Tarvers, Dennis Paoli, and Marcia Silver is carefully being studied by NWCA. Working out who will assess and how such people can be sensitive to the local community in which the writing center resides is NWCA’s task now. Professionalism may help writing centers become much more central to the academy’s operations. I submit that the increased opportunities for teaching and learning make the risk of moving from margins to the center worth taking. It would be a move that an administrator would admire.

Where we work, writing centers are associated with writing across the curriculum and in-class tutoring programs. We have formed partnerships with neighboring civic communities through service-learning projects. We have expanded into cyberspace, as daily there are more and more on-line tutoring programs and on-line writing labs. We have become the backbone of many an academic support center charged with enhancing student retention.

Organizationally, we are big as well. We are the National (maybe soon International) Writing Centers Association (with more than 400 members) and we do have assembly status with NCTE. With two publications—*The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal* (both having subscriptions at about 1,000)—the NWCA Press (with one book published in 1995 and two in 1998), the Website, the WCenter listserv, the NWCA listserv, our new MUD room, and the national conferences in addition to all

the conferences of the regional groups (including our European affiliate), NWCA has grown.

Simpson has advised writing center workers to think globally—to look at the big picture and not to remain on the margins: “I would urge,” she has written, “that careful study, a lot of talk and legwork, and, above all, the consistent requirement of looking at the whole institution, will be far and away the most effective way to end this matter of ‘marginalization’ for writing centers” (52). In my experience working in a writing center and talking with writing center workers, we are doing this: we have long known that in an effort to produce better writing, we have to be sensitive to the writer and to her or his reader. In other words, we work with many objectives in mind, not just one, and thus satisfy what central administrators most desire—at least as David Schwalm sees it—“an understanding of the institution at large” (62). We negotiate and compromise; we speak the language of the academy as well as of the student; we build alliances; we acquire respect from multiple constituencies.

This can be tricky business, as many have reminded us, Beth Boquet being the most recent:

The respect, security, and stability of the writing center must come first, and it is well documented how hard-won these are. But it is only by virtue of gaining respect that we stand a chance, in the face of high-profile moves (a huge administrative money-dump into hardware, for example), of maintaining the critical space (literally and figuratively) that our writing centers would do well to occupy. (8)

Boquet’s caveat is worth remembering, for as writing centers get bigger all the time, workers must ensure what Bonnie Sunstein, past NWCA President, once described as the pri-

mary function for writing centers: “Writing centers mark the point of contact between a reader and a writer that signals a conversation about an emerging text” (7-23). While I agree that we must guard against becoming so big and so professional that the valuable voices of existing writing center workers are silenced, or that the potentially valuable voices of new writing center workers are discouraged, in my view, writing center workers are not satisfied being the *next* best thing in writing or writing instruction; they are aware that their alliances position them to be the *best* next thing in education period.

Rhomboids not squares

Fifteen years ago, Steven North offered an idea of a writing center which was at the cutting edge of real educational reform. What he tried to explain was how to make the writing center that site where students are given a say—indeed control—in their work, their education. If nothing else, he explained how to make the writing center showcase the writing process as well as the social or collaborative nature of writing. In “Moveable Feast, Liminal Spaces: Writing Centers and the State of In-Betweenness,” Sunstein describes writing center programs from her fifteen years as a writing center worker. From San Diego to Andover, MA, from Cincinnati to Monmouth, New Jersey, from Chicago to Nashua, and from Detroit to Merrimack, New Hampshire, Sunstein describes people who “are learning and teaching the business of words[:] . . . high school kids at college, adults in a high school at night, a professor conferring with college writers in a dorm room, high school writers at camp, [college writing tutors at a high school working with inner-city middle school kids], a science teacher writing poetry and an English teacher writing a scientific report, linguistically challenged kids celebrating language on a city radio station” (13). Sunstein concludes that all of this “is the educational contribution of which writing centers can be the

most triumphant. It presages many programs just finding their ways into our institutions today" (13). This is not something I want on the margins, in between, as Sunstein wants; it's too dangerous for that in today's academy. This is something I want at the core of the academy—for obvious reasons.

Thinking big, practicing patience, and being multilingual might help all members of the academy to profit. In fact, I recall what Nancy Grimm notes and calls for in her award-winning article:

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." (23)

This is a change in perspective for some, but as Faigley writes, "we who work in and support writing centers must have a sense of how our potential roles are changing if we are to provide the institutional leadership that we are capable of providing" (9).

As we in the writing center prepare for this more central role in the academy, let us do so with the creativity and wisdom that we have employed in all of our programming. Let us remember what Wallace Stevens wrote in "Six Significant Landscapes":

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.
They confine themselves
To right-angled triangles.
If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving lines, ellipses—
As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon—
Rationalists would wear sombreros. (7)

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Call for Nominations—National Writing Centers Association Board

We will need to elect five at-large NWCA board members to take office in 2001. Each term is for two years. Please contact the people you nominate and be sure they are willing to run. Please send nominations (including name, institution and home addresses and phone numbers, and e-mail address) to Leigh Ryan, NWCA Secretary, The Writing Center, 0125 Taliaferro Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742 or e-mail to LR22@umail.umd.edu by August 1, 2000.

WLN in MLA Bibliography index

The *Writing Lab Newsletter* has been invited to be indexed in the *MLA International Bibliography* and listed in their *Directory of Periodicals*. This means that in the future, in addition to our index of articles, available on disk and on our OWL (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/Files/newsletter.html>), you can check the MLA bibliography.

TUTORS' COLUMN

You are not going anywhere until you clean up your essay!

Many students have been told that their paragraph or essay is messy, sloppy, unorganized, out of order, missing stuff, needs to be cleaned up, or has irrelevant details. Strangely enough, their mothers tell them the same things about their rooms. Mothers and teachers have the crazy idea that everything has a place and a use, and if it does not, it has to be thrown out! Many students are told to both take out unnecessary information and to add more detail. Many times, feeling betrayed or overwhelmed by these demands, the students begin by randomly taking out stuff from their pile. They take things out to please the teacher. Often, we in the writing center hear students say things like: My teacher doesn't like this part. My teacher told me this should be taken out; I like it, but she is the one who gives the grade. I have to do what my teacher wants. I think it sounds good. I think it is important, but the teacher says it isn't.

Students often feel that taking something out of the essay rates the removed item as less valuable. They need to be reminded that although there are a lot of cool things in the world and lots of good things to say about those things, everything cannot fit in the allotted space. Putting too much together creates confusion and clutter. Just as a cluttered room can make it hard to find things, a cluttered paper makes it difficult to get the point. Perhaps it is better to look at a deletion from an essay, not as something thrown out, but as information that may be used in a future essay.

I have read paragraphs that feel like a zoo; they have so many different

items and events inside. I have found dialogue about turtles in descriptive paragraphs about someone's favorite place. I have wondered how a lengthy vacation to grandma's house got into a narrative about someone's first day at college. But, rooms can be just as disorganized as papers. I am surely not the only one who has been told their room is like a zoo. I have found silverware in someone's makeup drawer and a hairbrush in another's kitchen. I have seen a dirty sock used for a coaster. Turtles, grandma's house, silverware, hairbrushes and even dirty socks are important items, but need to be put in their proper place.

Just as we need to clean up a messy room, we also need to clean up our ideas. We can often find a thesis way down in the conclusion. By the end of the paper, students seem to crystallize their ideas. Then we have to move the counter arguments into a position where they can be responded to. The grandmas have to be removed to their own biography. The socks have to be sent to the washer. The coasters or other appropriate ideas, objects and information have to be brought in. Sometimes, a teacher or tutor may blame students for sloppy work and then proceed to fix the paper with the red pen. Likewise, parents who find that their children do not clean their room appropriately do it themselves. Students are left with the idea that their elders do things the way they want to, and that is the only law. Fixing and cleaning up a student's paper will never end if students are not taught the cultural laws of organization. Organization does not come as naturally as some people think. We must learn a different lan-

guage for the page. It is a more formal, complex language, and has more rules than the spoken word. Speaking takes little or no organization. Students often come into the writing center with organizational problems, or papers which seem like rough transcriptions of the spoken word. The spoken word is free and forgiving, but in order to be an effective writer, humans must train their thoughts and words to follow the patterns expected by their culture.

We tutors constantly experience new patterns of organization as we work with students from other cultures. If we as tutors, teachers, and writers discover the patterns, and recognize the need that every rational being has to understand the pattern at its core, we will be more capable of teaching organization.

I have found that relating the organization of words in an essay to more familiar objects can help a student better understand organization rather than having students guess where things might go or feel they have to move things around or throw things out. Images of underwear in the kitchen, brushes in the silverware drawer, toilet paper in the living room, and a bowl of soup on the bed, help students visualize the necessity of organization. I am convinced that if they understand the pattern, they will be more likely to put things where we expect them to be in the first place or at least be able to clean it up themselves.

Sharlene Goodliffe
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Book Review

Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times. By Nancy Maloney Grimm. Portsmouth, NH: Boyton/Cook, 1999. (140 pages, paperback, \$26)

Reviewed by Suzanne Diamond (Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio)

Nancy Grimm's central observation, when all monolithic abstractions have been cleared aside, is that higher education in general and writing centers in particular must adopt new stances toward their constituencies if they are to remain socially relevant. Peeling away the layers of unexamined social prejudice embedded in a presumably neutral term such as "fair," Grimm argues persuasively that educators are as embedded as is that simple term in both the etymological baggage and the unexamined prejudices that structure their own social privilege. For this reason, Grimm raises new questions about presumably value-neutral or progressive writing center pieties such as "minimalist tutoring," or "peer editing," and she also pauses to launch a few gratuitous swipes at the quest for authorial objectivity, a straw man long assumed fallen, at least, one supposes, by most members the composition-instructional community.

Grimm frames the reforms she advocates as an enlightened adoption of postmodernism's practical implications. She argues compellingly that writing centers are particularly situated to access the muse of postmodernism on a daily basis. In fact, she identifies the contemporary predicament of writing centers within higher education as a kind of tense intersection between modernist and postmodernist ways of structuring reality; Grimm asserts that attempts to change the impoverished *representations of writing center work* often result in frustration because the postmodernist understandings that develop in the writing center clash with the modernist understandings that

structure higher education (2, emphasis mine).

Modernism, in Grimm's sketch, insists upon individualism, the capacity for objectivity, and the belief in progress. This worldview, she asserts, resembles that of contemporary higher education. Postmodernism, on the other hand, scrutinizes each of these ideologies for the privileges and power structures they facilitate under the legitimizing banner of fairness. Writing centers, in Grimm's formulation, are peculiarly situated at the juncture between these two conceptual monoliths; their everyday contact with diversity, technology, and authorial struggle sensitizes them to the rumblings of postmodernism. At the same time, their institutionalization as handmaidens within a modernist higher educational framework serves to cramp the ways they might act upon the postmodern challenges to which they are privy.

But the passage quoted above hints, I think, at a fundamental question about audience and purpose that overshadows Grimm's ambitious work, and whose traces, as Grimm might instruct us, could be inevitable: *who is the audience* for Grimm's conceptual reforms? If the object of Grimm's presumably reformist text is to change writing center philosophies and practices, then this book aims to instruct "us" about what we do every day. If its object is to get institutions of higher education to change the ways writing centers are understood and institutionalized, then this text is for "them," administrators, trustees, and executives in the college and university structure. If

it exists, however, to "change the impoverished *representations* of writing center work," a fair enough goal, as many might attest, then this text has a more subtle audience and purpose: it aims to be a road map whereby writing centers might improve the ways "we" are understood (and thus either abandoned or supported) by "them." In this case, Grimm's text would be instructional rhetoric, something to be read for strategies.

That Grimm makes characteristic recourse to the tenets of self-help discourse as guiding principles for writing center initiatives seems to support its purpose as instructional rhetoric for writing center directors interested in improving how their work is represented and understood in higher education at large. In keeping with this theme, Grimm cautions against the "defensive responses to postmodern change" that can mar the better intentions of writing center theorists. Grimm claims that one of these mistaken, if understandable, responses can be defensive "distancing" both from the sometimes-outmoded aims of the institutions we serve and from remedial classifications. Another can be "blaming": blaming faculty, for instance, when our work is misrepresented or blaming students when they fail to produce the instant successes that supposedly bring us recognition and credit. Yet another defensive response can be "helping the other become more like us," or, in other words, resigning ourselves to an externally imposed role whereby "mainstreaming" student writers becomes our main concern.

To her great credit, Grimm has anticipated and effectively countered the reader who might sneer at this recourse to self-help terminology and values; at another point in her text, for instance, she positions her attraction to self-help discourse within an activist tradition peopled by such proponents of social change as Gloria Steinem and bell hooks. “As activists for political and social change,” Grimm reports, “both of these women offer self-help texts with the realization that external political change is more likely to occur when accompanied by internal personal change” (98, Note 3). I appreciate Grimm’s impulse to dignify self-help theory if for different reasons than those she uses for support; maybe every honest thinker is a critical and terminological scavenger, and Grimm’s unapologetic way of marching between the hallowed and the marginal—between the Frankfurt school and the Abigail Van Buren school—has admirable feminist and class-based implications that mirror the reforms she appears to stand for. It is only when I return to Grimm’s own manner of justification for this critical move between self-help and social reform that I find concrete evidence for what is elsewhere an ephemeral if fundamental inconsistency, for me, in her text. Even in Grimm’s sketch of this complicated phenomenon, “postmodernism” undermines, with thoroughgoing ruthlessness, the certainties presumably once built upon tidy oppositions. But while Grimm acknowledges this ruthlessness theoretically, I do not always see its reverberations in practice. In poising modernism against postmodernism, for instance, she seems to disown the very value judgment that would bring impact to her arguments. She insists, for instance, that “I may seem to be elevating the postmodern over the modern, creating another binary with a privileged term, which is a very un-postmodern thing to do” (3). “So go ahead,” I verily want to shout, “I’d pardon an un-postmodern infraction for some eccentric and personal insights afforded you by your own predicament

and position!” But the postmodern party line, to the extent one can speak of such a thing, sadly takes precedent.

In practice—and happily so—however, Grimm’s commitment to postmodern non-committal has its lapses. Her insistence that self-help discourse, with its implicit distinction between initiatives in the realm of the “internal personal” and answering adjustments in the realm of the “external political,” for example, presupposes a self—and, by extension, a writing center—that might, inexplicably, step free of its implication in the good and bad faith that have characterized higher education historically. This is not a bad thing so much as an inevitable one, I think; one tenet of self-help discourse is, in fact, that, while solitary persons are inevitably and integrally enmeshed in social systems—be they ethnic, gendered, or racial communities, family systems, or institutions that organize work—there are key times when envisioning themselves as fundamentally *separate from these systems* is necessary for the presumably more healthy or satisfying redirection of those structuring systems. In other words, discrete selfhood might be, at some fundamental level, a fiction, but many will tell us that there are times when that fiction is enabling.

Along these lines, I found myself wondering about the efficacy of Grimm’s mobilization of massive bogeymen such as Modernism and Postmodernism, all for the task of what turn out to be modest and intuitively sound central observations about writing center reforms, such as the modification of “minimalist” strategies or the recognition of how we reproduce, when we fail to own, our relative privilege. Dealing in the high theoretical stakes mobilized by “postmodernism,” however, Grimm must disavow any reformist intentions and comply almost abjectly with the by now somewhat tired dictates of “anti-binarism.” If the transition from “modernist” to “postmodernist” ways of working with

student writers cannot be framed, even by Grimm’s motivational tract, as a progress narrative (note lower-case “p”), what claim does this book stake, finally, to any new and presumably less “impoverished representation of writing center work”? I come up short when I weigh its purpose alongside its probable audience; what fundamentally new strategies does it offer, finally, to writing center practitioners, and how do monolithic abstractions about modernism and postmodernism—abstractions which, it must be noted, are under-theorized here—advance or motivate these strategies?

Grimm’s anti-hierarchical impulses seem to be the product of admirable personal sensitivity and pedagogical reflection: “good intentions,” at their best. But, to impose a philosophy of ruthless anti-hierarchy, simply for the sake of a theoretical conformity to “postmodernism” seems dangerously open-ended—and maybe even disingenuous—when we are talking about the ways individuals must sometimes initiate new—dare I say *better?*—social and pedagogical practices.

If, as postmodernist developments have apparently instructed us, there is no stepping free of one’s context, if progress is only ideology and objectivity is an just illusion (and all of these precautions have an undisputed value), then, for better and for worse, solitary persons—be they social activists, writing center coordinators, or restless inhabitants of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula—cannot accurately *conceptualize*, much less effectively *respond* to the circumstances that surround them. In other words, it might be *practically perilous*, even if *theoretically safe*, to resign our conceptions of selfhood, agency, and progress to the strictures of postmodernism, intuitively persuasive though these strictures might be. Much as I admire Grimm’s work and vitality, as I close her text I am inclined to wonder whether social “impoverishment” might be better addressed by a good, old-fashioned and

theoretically naive reform plot, one whereby amorphous subjectivities might take shelter, without apology, in strategic identities, one whereby the

blame that prefigures rebellious action is sometimes preferable to adjustment, and one whereby a localized and

darkly-penned map for the future might align itself shamelessly with homespun concepts like progress.

Reviewed by Kevin Davis (East Central University, Ada, Oklahoma)

Having lived in places with abundant winters (northern Montana, the West Virginia mountains), I appreciate the winter driving analogy which threads throughout the introduction to Nancy Maloney Grimm's new book. Grimm, using the analogy that preparation and adaptation are necessary to survive a winter's drive, suggests that a strong theoretical underpinning will help a writing center in a similar way. She, of course, offers postmodernism as the theory du jour, a high-maintenance approach if ever there was one.

For many years now, however, I've lived in Oklahoma, where we *might* get one dose of white stuff each winter. And I've discovered that southerners have their own way of adapting to winter precipitation: staying home. The theory here, I guess, is that you only need a shield if you're going into battle, and a smart person doesn't do that. Grimm doesn't leave room for the concept of avoiding battles in her writing center plan.

Nor does she take a simple, low-tech approach. When it does snow in Oklahoma, the town shuts down, the streets empty, and I can Nordic ski (there are two pairs in town besides my own) down the middle of Main Street. When you're faced with winter storms, you can have an intricate plan for surviving your travels—Grimm's idea—or you can stay home, or you can make do with an old pair of skinny skis and some wool knickers.

My first quarrel, then, is with Grimm's basic premise, that the best way to deal with snow is to mount a battle plan and construct survival principles. Can't we just stay home?

My second quarrel: I'm really not sure who the audience is for this book or why it needed to be written. To me, you see, postmodernism is a kind of no-brainer. I mean, it's exactly the kind of deep, multi-perspected look "at what the narrative of progress . . . excludes" (15) that I find most educated people do most all of the time. Maybe I'm extending more credit to my colleagues in writing centers than Grimm does, but I've never known too many of us to go blindly accepting anything. Take, for example, an NWCA Board Meeting where accreditation is being discussed (an exercise in cat herding if ever there was one) where each speaker brings a unique perspective, a different idea of what is being excluded.

The other thing that I've noticed about writing center directors is the strong theoretical positions they stake out when starting a center. From the most Bruffeeian discussion house to the extreme Kollnesque grammar lab, writing centers have always staked out some theoretical high ground. So is Grimm writing to the postmodernists, preaching to the choir? Or is she trying to argue a "better" philosophical position to the church goers down the block? I've been to a lot of writing center groups over the years, and I've yet to find many in the undecided camp, and that's where Grimm seems to have aimed her book.

Throughout the book, Grimm argues for an insurgent approach to institutional oppression. For example, chapter four suggests that "writing centers can work more effectively with students if that work is situated within the contrasting democratic desire to under-

stand and negotiate difference" (82); she wants us to be "catalysts in the effort to rethink literacy" (98). I'm feeling old and jaded here, but I don't see anything approaching radicalism in these calls to action.

My third quarrel, then: it's a polite, internal radicalism Grimm proposes. Never does she suggest that writing centers might work outside the institution; never does she suggest true rabble-raising; never does she suggest doing anything which would dramatically upset the status quo; never does she suggest telling our clients that maybe—just maybe—being a successful college student isn't the end-all of the world. The difference between a liberal and a conservative, Frank Lentricchia once said (*Criticism and Social Change*, Chicago, 1983), is that liberals—Lentricchia calls them "nervous conservatives"—want to tinker with the status quo, as opposed to radicals who want to instigate real change in society. Given that damning distinction, Grimm is clearly a tinkering liberal who pretends to be a radical. A polite radicalism, built to work comfortably and sensibly inside the very system she argues needs changing.

I guess there's really nothing *wrong* with Grimm's book or its concepts, but I didn't find anything particularly enlightening. It's a call to do what most of us already do; it's a nervous-conservative mainstreamer suggesting radical subversion to a bipartite audience: those who will never hear or those who have been true radicals for decades.

Reviewed by Alison Russell (Xavier University, Cincinnati, OH)

Just before I sat down to write this review, one of my Senior Seminar students asked for permission to miss a week of classes so that she could accompany a group of high school students to El Salvador. Once there, she and the younger students would attend events commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Archbishop Romero's assassination by Salvadoran death squads. Jessica needed to raise a thousand dollars in a few weeks to cover her expenses, a task that didn't faze her in the least. She was going; she would find the money.

I begin my review with this story not because my student's good intentions echo the title of the text under review, but rather because the degree of her commitment made me recall Nancy Grimm's invitation to writing center workers "to imagine a practice where social justice replaces pale versions of fairness" (120). Indeed, one reason I asked to review the book had to do with my position as Writing Center Director at a Jesuit university that encourages students, staff and faculty to participate in the promotion of social justice. Before reading Grimm's book, I hadn't truly conceived of my work in the writing center as an opportunity to enact significant social and political change—at least not beyond a general recognition of my center's role in contributing to students' literacy practices—perhaps because it is difficult enough to find time to address all the other things that need attention in a writing center. *Good Intentions* challenges me to do more—much more. I may be able to give my student Jessica a check to alleviate the financial burdens of her trip to El Salvador, but Grimm requires a commitment from me—and from writing center workers in general—that extends well beyond good intentions.

In general terms, the book draws upon postmodern theorizing to articu-

late a new kind of writing center, one that is more attuned to the practice of democratic literacy and that serves as a site for public and political action. In five chapters, Grimm explains the potential of various postmodern theories to transform the way we think about our work, additionally drawing upon self-help theory and her own experience to explore the human dynamics in writing center relationships. As broadly outlined here, the book's approach will not set off many alarms for potential readers, particularly those who have embraced the work of Paulo Freire and radical educators such as Henry Giroux. Similarly, readers well-versed in postmodern theory will feel comfortable with the author's references and terminology, recognizing, for example, the by now common gesture of opposing postmodernism to modernism that Grimm employs in her opening chapter. Given some of this familiar territory, my readers may be wondering why *Good Intentions* has the potential to disturb anyone directing or working in a writing center. The answer is in the details of the book.

One of the strengths of *Good Intentions*—its questioning of many of the practices writing center workers take for granted—is also the aspect of the book that many readers may resist. Before citing specific examples, I note that much of Grimm's discussion follows from her observation that postmodern theory allows us to "stop locating literacy problems in individuals and instead locate them in cultural constructions" (29). In practice, this means that writing center workers will need to rethink shared codes about non-directive tutoring. As Grimm argues, literacy is not "natural" or neutral but rather a set of cultural practices shaped by the variables of class, gender, race, ethnicity and so forth. An ideological understanding of literacy in the writing center, she explains, translates into different kinds of tutoring

sessions, ones that require tutors to address and explain academic expectations extensively and intensively. Here, Grimm acknowledges that such sessions may initially require more time than is usually allotted to them, and she also qualifies her challenge by noting that tutors can be more direct without being directive; yet she concludes that non-directive tutoring makes us enforce the status quo—the values of middle-class culture and academe.

In addition to questioning non-directive tutoring, Grimm critiques writing center ethics codes (those that support "hands-off" policies of minimalist tutoring), the perceived importance of the peer-relationship in tutoring (which makes tutors too secure in their judgment of others' abilities, identities, and experiences) and the metaphor of the academic community embraced by writing centers (which masks conflicts between different communities' literacy practices). In every case, Grimm takes care to anticipate her readers' objections, returning to theory and case studies to offer justification for her perspective. Much of her discussion is persuasive, but some of her charges are unsettling. She argues, for example, that writing centers are complicit in institutional oppression if they do not "acknowledge the culturally specific and arbitrary nature of academic expectation." Readers will recognize that there is no middle ground here; one is either on or off the bus, with Grimm or against social justice. The provocative nature of *Good Intentions* will not sit well with all readers, but one senses that Grimm is not worried about that. She acknowledges our concerns about anarchy, about losing funding, about losing standards, about our sometimes-marginalized positions in relationship to our universities, but she remains steadfast in her belief that we must claim our moral responsibilities as writing center workers. One cannot help but admire her commitment to so-

cial justice in the writing center, and yet those who are willing to join Grimm on her mission may wonder how such a transformation happens, particularly as regards the training of tutors (especially undergraduate tutors). Toward the end of her book, she notes she has no training curriculum or set of readings to offer her audience; instead she encourages us to become theorists and in turn to encourage our tutors to become theorists, open to change and ready to question the institutions and cultures that impinge on our work. The concluding *Afterword* by Nancy Barron serves as an illustration of this process: identifying herself

as an underrepresented student and a writing center worker, Barron addresses issues of diversity and difference in a personal narrative that illuminates the experience of “involuntary minorities,” those born in this country but not part of the majority culture.

Good Intentions is a brave book that challenges writing center workers to reconceive their practice in many valuable ways. What I like most about the text is the author’s respect for students and her recognition that they all too often receive the blame when their writing doesn’t meet their instructor’s approval. I wonder, however, if all of the

responsibility for change can or should be shouldered by student tutors and overworked directors. Grimm explains that a postmodernist view of writing centers posits students not as isolated individuals but as members of communities, but writing centers—I would add—are similarly situated in relational contexts. While most of us will welcome her strategy of “articulation,” through which we can assist students to understand the ideological nature of academic expectations, some of us might hope to be supported in this task by our universities, our faculties and our writing programs. Then again, books such as *Good Intentions* may help us to gain that support.

Reviewed by Joan Hawthorne (University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND)

Nancy Grimm’s new book, *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, speaks for those of us who live with a nagging feeling that “common knowledge” about writing center practice is rooted in flawed theory. In clear prose, Grimm articulates a postmodern perspective and uses it to analyze practice. Her theoretical points inevitably are followed by examples that clarify her meaning but also emphasize the value of applying postmodern theory to writing center practice. As a reader, I’m left thinking that Grimm is exactly right about what’s wrong.

Grimm’s arrival at a postmodern theory of writing center work may have been aided by her working class background, which she alludes to in this book. As an undergraduate, her language and perspective marked her as an outsider in the academic world, and, like many of our students today, she initially assumed the problem was her intellect. When a helpful friend offered advice on paper-writing and grammar, Grimm soaked up the pointers — eventually learning to “pass” in an academic world that was as linguistically narrow and judgmental as any

other class system. Now recognized as a pre-eminent voice in writing center theory, Grimm still focuses on students who are outsiders and wrestles with the ways that writing center practices can re-inscribe (or transform) existing class stereotypes.

As deeply theoretical as *Good Intentions* is, it is also extremely practical. Grimm provides several suggestions, scattered throughout the book, for correcting the problems she identifies in current practice. But the difficulty, as she points out, lies less in thinking about how our practices could be different and more in understanding in a deeply meaningful way that our current literacy practices — inside writing centers and out — often best support those individuals who are already advantaged.

Grimm reminds us that there is nothing inherently “better,” for example, about the ways of understanding and explaining that are most valued within the academy. Good modernists, Grimm says, justify upholding the status quo in terms of the student’s own future good. But this modernist perspective can create a double bind, trapping both

tutor and student. That student is implicitly constructed within a writing assignment, sometimes in ways totally inconsistent with the student’s own sense of self. Tutors who see students caught by such constraints are likely to feel caught themselves. Much of our professional literature cautions tutors against taking too much control, doing too much of the thinking, laying things out too clearly — in short, against “telling.” When “telling” is the tutor’s greatest sin, those tutors are left with few options for working productively with students who are outsiders to academic norms. The result is that students who are least able to intuitively decode the academic world are doubly disadvantaged by a system in which neither teacher nor tutor is willing to be explicit.

This inequitable system can be challenged if we “accept the notion that institutional practices are not fair” (p. 103). Only through accepting that premise, Grimm says, will we be prepared to change systems that encourage us to hold students personally responsible for their failure to meet academic literacy norms. And Grimm argues that what’s needed is not more

personal responsibility for literacy failure, but rather greater corporate responsibility, especially on the part of writing center workers, for “changing the gates of that [academic literacy] club when change is necessary” (103).

Proofreading, the bogeyman of writing center theory and practice, becomes a case in point. Grimm says that writing center policies against editorial or proofreading help provide implicit support for the principle of ranking people based on literacy standards. Instead of using poor editing skills as a rationale for excluding certain classes of people from the academic elite, Grimm argues that we have a moral imperative to teach those skills. Furthermore, *teaching* editing is likely to “feel a great deal like [doing] editing and proofreading” (p. 106) for and with students. And it’s painfully clear that higher order writing tasks are subject to equally powerful but arbitrary norms that define the sorts of evidence, organization, and argument that are appropriate within an academic culture. Prohibitions against excessive help often prevent tutors from naming the (frequently invisible) rules that govern our readings of academic texts. In

Grimm’s ideal writing center, the invisible would be both named and explored, so that students from unconventional literacy backgrounds could make informed choices about their writing. If a writer chose to resist norms, the tutor would help by providing expertise, perhaps in the form of “telling,” to enable an effective resistance.

If these are hard issues for teachers to deal with in their own classrooms, they’re harder yet for writing center tutors, who must struggle to separate their personal literacy values from those of both writers and teachers. Although Grimm clearly articulates how that can be done with students who are writing comp papers, she is less explicit about applying postmodern ideas to our work with students who are writing admissions essays for the education major, research papers in history, collaboratively-written senior projects in management, or graduate theses in engineering — all among the challenges that students have brought to our writing center within the past month. And the situation of writers in other fields is genuinely different, in that students taking classes in business

or education really may want to join those discourse communities (in contrast to comp students, most of whom are less eager to enter the teacher’s academic community). This gap, however, may represent an opportunity for further discussion rather than a flaw in Grimm’s book.

Of course, Grimm also believes that applying a postmodern perspective to writing center work is only the beginning. We also must work to broaden the literacy norms in all our communities, both inside and outside of academia. This is the more daunting part of the task she would set for us. Nevertheless, her call to rethink the writing center’s role in reinforcing literacy norms is compelling. As long as writing centers teach normative literacy rather than engaging in discussions about comparative literacies, we will find ourselves serving the needs of institutions rather than students. This argument may not be new to the writing center community, but Grimm makes it with unique clarity and credibility, and at a time when we may be more ready than ever before to reconsider writing center pedagogy.

Quotable Tutor Quote

“An effective conference resembles an engaging conversation in which participants work hard to understand each other.”

Antoine Bellin
Washington College
Chestertown, MD 21620

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

Sept. 28-30: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Minneapolis, MN

Contact: either Suzanne M. Swiderski at <sswiders@loras.edu> or Larry D. Harred at <larry.d.harred@uwrf.edu> Conference website: <http://www.maclester.edu/~mwca>

November 2-4, 2000. National Writing Centers Association in conjunction with the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Baltimore, MD.

Conference website: <http://www.english.udel.edu/wc/mawca/nwcacon.html>

Feb. 16-18, 2001: Southeastern Writing Centers Association, in Auburn, AL

Contact: Isabelle Thompson, Auburn University (thompis@groupwise1.duc.auburn.edu) and Glenda Conway, University of Montevallo (conway@montevallo.edu)

Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing

October 6-8, 2000
North Andover, Massachusetts
"Peer Tutoring 2000: Looking Ahead, Looking Back"

Conference information is available on the website: www.chss.iup.edu/wc/ncptw

Southeastern Writing Center Association Conference

February 16-18, 2001
Auburn, Alabama
"Collaboration at the Center"

For information, contact Isabelle Thompson, Auburn University (thompis@groupwise1.duc.auburn.edu) and Glenda Conway, University of Montevallo (conwayg@montevallo.edu)

National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference

Call for Proposals
May 31—June 2, 2001
Bloomington, Indiana
"Writing, Teaching, and Learning in New Contexts"

Information on submitting conference proposals can be found at <http://www.indiana.edu/~wac2001/prop.html>. Proposals can be e-mailed as attachments or submitted on an online form on the website. Address inquires to wac2001@indiana.edu or by phone: 812-855-4928. Proposal deadline: October 13, 2000.

Conference on Computers and Writing

Call for Proposals
May 17-20, 2001
Muncie, Indiana
"2001: A Cyber Odyssey"

Proposals are solicited for individual presentations, panels, round tables, and hands-on workshops that extend and explore issues of technology and teaching. Proposals should be submitted via the website: www.bsu.edu/cw2001, by October 17, 2000.

A writing center's first statistical snapshot

Writing centers provide information to administrators in a number of ways. The most common writing center statistics revolve around the number of students served. If a center is busy, then all is well. How many students? How many consultations? Do these numbers increase or decrease from term to term? The numbers are presented as raw data, as percentages, as multi-colored charts and graphs. But sooner or later, someone will ask, "But how do all these numbers relate to student performance?" In other words: grades.

Writing centers need to be careful when the topic of grades arises. For the working consultant, grades are, in fact, taboo. Too many students are looking for grade-oriented opinions in order to combat the already recorded judgment of an instructor. Even a seemingly innocent tutorial comment, "This paper looks fine," can be transformed into an unpleasant confrontation with a C-issuing teacher. One can almost hear the student complaining, "But the writing center said this was okay!" This is just part of the grade problem. In addition, a writing center has to have the same sort of philosophy of, say, a test preparation school. If these schools promised specific exam scores, they would be refunding quite a bit of tuition money. Rather, they understandably hedge their claims. Assuming that a test taker follows the advice of the preparation course, then it is more likely that he or she will do better had the course not been taken. We promise to help you, and we probably will, but we don't promise that this will get you an A- or even a passing grade for that matter. It is a rare educational bow to practicality.

It is also unsatisfying—especially from an administrative point of view. It removes, or at least seems to remove, a fundamental aspect of any service or product, accountability. After all, if you don't promise anything, you can't be held responsible for a failure to deliver. Delivery has to be measured; in the field of education, delivery is measured in grades. Writing centers might have legitimate reasons for treading lightly in the minefield of grades, but administrators—who are, after all, paying for a service—have a right to ask for some kind of proof that their money is well spent. Sooner or later, this proof comes down to grades.

In my case, the question came sooner; later hasn't arrived yet. My writing center is located in the United Arab Emirates at the American University of Sharjah, a school that first opened in 1997 and has yet to graduate its first class. The writing center opened in October 1999 and, in terms of student usage, was an immediate success. With limited hours and a staff of just one (that would be yours truly, the humble author), a student population of approximately 1300 produced nearly 250 consultations in the first semester. By every standard of which I was aware, the AUS writing center had had an amazing start.

This strong beginning led to rapid growth. In just the second term of operation, business hours doubled, the staff tripled, and a small computer lab was installed. While many centers languish for years in sparsely furnished back offices, the AUS center was getting to be, well, the "center" of attention. Part of the attention was the expected, albeit dreaded, request for grade information from the administra-

tors. The request arrived in January 2000, a mere four months into the center's life. I responded to this request not as an administratively seasoned Coordinator but as a tutor in the habit of being positive and encouraging. Of course I could do a tracking study! Why not?

After thinking it over for a few days, several answers to that question occurred to me. Both the center and the university were too young. The center had one term of raw data, and even the three years of grade information from the university needed qualifiers. As a new school, AUS revised courses, curriculum and even majors. I would be rating a small center sample against an evolving standard. Midterm grades were not issued during the Fall 1999 term, so I had no objective tool for judging a student's progress, or lack thereof, over the course of the term. Nor was there yet an established system of keeping student portfolios, yet another missing evaluative procedure. My choice was severely limited. In fact, I had but one choice. I had to answer the question that no center likes to hear. No, it did not come from a student: "Is this going to get me a better grade?" It came from the understandable need for administrative accountability, and it was phrased a bit more gently: "Can we track the performance of center clients?" The final version of the question was of my own making: "What were the grades of center clients compared to students who never used the center?" No matter how it was phrased, I had to attempt an answer to the question that most writing centers forbid their tutors even to acknowledge.

This led to a straightforward proce-

ture. Like every other writing center, I kept a record of every consultation, so I knew who used the center and how often they used it. All the grades were available from the files of the English instructors. All I had to do was collect the information and calculate the average grade of center users compared to center non-users, a simple procedure to determine whether or not the writing center provided better grades.

Not that this simple procedure was without its share of complications. Anybody who has taken Statistics 101 knows that there is never such a thing as a simple one-to-one correlation. There are always factors that complicate a strictly numerical evaluation. Presumably, for example, these statistics were to measure whether or not the writing center was manufacturing better student writers. This makes a basic assumption: the grade reflects only writing performance and nothing else. This is simply not so. Grades reflect class attendance, class participation, quiz and test performance—and, not the least of the complicating factors, the teacher's policies and procedures regarding the writing center.

As I have already indicated, AUS is very much a work-in-progress. While the general move is towards some measure of standardization in courses, this has not yet been fully accomplished. There is certainly no standard policy regarding how a teacher is to make use of the writing center. More than understandable: the center is an island of newness in an ever-changing landscape of educational experimentation. Besides, even the most established of writing centers have a hard time getting a consistent feel for how teachers view the service. I would venture a guess that such a "consistent feel" does not exist anywhere.

Two examples from the AUS grade study will sound familiar to many writing center directors. One instructor

in my survey is an avid supporter of the center, a fact reflected in his syllabi. Since he feels that all students benefit from at least some tutorial time, he offers points toward the final grade when a student uses the service; x number of consultations results in y number of points. Naturally, this skews any grade-based study; it makes the center look like a rather productive grade factory. On the other hand, a good many teachers view the center as, frankly, a sort of dumping ground for the most desperate cases of bad writing. Once students have already proved they are prime F material, the center is thrust upon them as a last ditch effort to salvage a passing grade. I am happy to say that miracles sometimes occur under these circumstances, but, for the most part, this practice skews the grade results downward.

As I gathered the data, I deliberately ignored these complications. My hope was that they would cancel each other out, that they would somehow combine to form a usable and accurate average. Keeping in mind my own inclination to make "my" center look as good as possible, I tried to test the data a number of ways to eliminate this personal bias. First, I looked at the data from three instructors who sent me complete grade sheets for their sections. The ten sections thus represented amounted to a sample of about 200 students, small perhaps, but still equivalent to 17% of the student body—and an even larger percentage of the students enrolled in Communications 101 and 102. More important, the three teachers had diverse educational philosophies as indicated by their use of the center and by the widely diverging grade averages. The sample, though not complete, was both large and varied, a fair test for the center's impact on grades.

The result was positive. In all three cases, students who used the center had a higher average grade than stu-

dents who never used the center. The averages, using a 4-point scale, are as follows with center users first: 2.59/2.27, 3.17/2.81, 3.06/2.00. As can be seen, the differences range from about a quarter of a point to a bit over a full point.

This tells only part of the story. If these three instructors had anything in common, it was that all three of them were fairly strong advocates of center usage. They weren't recommending the center to only those students on the verge of failing. Therefore, the students from their ten sections represented a broader range of student skills than the second group of teachers, those who sent the worst writers for remedial work. Predictably, students from this second group had lower grades. Even so, when I added their grades to the overall center average, center users still came in higher, 2.77/2.36. Indeed, center users placed lower in only one area. When I compared the average grade from the remedial group to the overall average grade, this specific group of center users scored a 2.24, about a tenth of a point lower. Part of the reason for the strong performance of center clients is that center clients simply did not fail. There was not a single F recorded among them and only three Ds. Three other center clients failed to complete a course with a grade of C-. (AUS policy dictates at least a "C" for a student to earn credit.) Since my sample is much smaller than I would prefer, those six students still represent a non-completion rate of 16.5% of my total sample. Given that the non-completion rate for the College of Arts and Sciences as a whole is 24%, the center still fared well.

This still leaves a most important question unanswered. Why did those who attended the center do so much better? I'm afraid that my answers are mere speculation, and familiar-sounding speculation at that. Students who use the center regularly are better mo-

tivated; naturally, they would perform at a higher level. Although I surveyed all instructors for anecdotal evidence regarding this issue, I received few useful answers. There are good reasons for this reluctance on the instructor's part. Several of them pointed to the objections I have already raised here. A few argued that my statistical sample was too small. I noted these objections but decided to proceed with the study anyway. Even a small study such as this one can provide useful information, especially when it is viewed in the proper context. On a yearly basis, there are only so many brand new writing centers in the academic world. Of this small number, an even smaller percentage are located in exclusively ESL environments. Indeed, the AUS writing center is one of just a few in the entire Arabic-speaking world, and most certainly it is the

newest. It would be negligent of me to pass by this opportunity to create a statistical snapshot of a writing center in such a unique situation.

My goal is that this snapshot can serve two basic purposes. First, I hope that my data can be compared to data from centers in less anomalous positions. If writing centers produce similar results no matter the circumstances, then it lends some scientific credibility to our work. Second, I want to use this study as a first step in creating a more complete picture. If, as I suspect, the AUS Writing Center is in a truly unique position, then I have a truly unique opportunity to contribute to the growing body of writing center knowledge.

Craig Magee
American University of Sharjah
Sharjah, UAE

Quotable Tutor Quote

“Writing is a personal extension of a person’s knowledge onto a sheet of paper. It is an attempt to communicate, and although what we see in the Writing Center is often de-personalized because it has been assigned, it is still the product of an individual and should be treated as such.”

John Verbos
Washington College
Chestertown, MD

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