

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 25, Number 6

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

February, 2001

...FROM THE EDITOR...

In the world of writing labs, we engage in a multi-faceted array of actions. For example we have data to collect, proposals to make, stories to tell, other fields of expertise to borrow from. And this month's issue of the newsletter offers insights in each of these areas. Rachel Perkes leads us through the complexities of what she learned when she attempted to collect data on what might look like a reasonably obvious matter of how we measure usage of our labs. Julie Eckerle, Karen Rowan, and Shevaun Watson propose that we consider (and act on) a matter that hasn't had adequate discussion—graduate student administrators. Bob Barnett and Jacquelyn Kleinedler show us how the employee handbook of a business like GAP can help us set policies and procedures. And the stories of Jay Peters and Sarah Davis remind us of how rich stories can be and how much we learn from well-told ones like theirs.

This month's newsletter has some great reading. Refill your coffee cup, find a quiet corner in your center, and enjoy.

• Muriel Harris, editor

...INSIDE...

National Online Dialogue Reveals Need for Standardization, Benchmarks

• Rachel B. Perkes 1

Conference Calendar 3

Graduate Student Writing Center Administrators: Some Concerns and Proposals

• Julie Eckerle, Karen Rowan, and Shevaun Watson 4

Tutors' Column:

"Ethical Missteps, Conflicting Worldviews, Power and Silence"

• Jay Peters 7

When Writing Centers Mind Their Own Business: A Cautious Comparison

• Bob Barnett and Jacquelyn Kleinedler 10

Something from Nothing: The Story (I Love to Tell) of the Development of the Writing Lab at Chowan College

• Sarah Davis 14

National online dialogue reveals need for standardization, benchmarks

Recently, the director of our community college writing center approached me regarding our tutorial numbers. She wanted to know how we compared to other writing centers. Were we low, average, high? I posted on the WCenter listerv what I thought was a simple request: "Please tell me how many students your center tutors per semester and what your overall enrollment is"; The response was overwhelming and resulted in an engaging dialogue. Obviously, from the number of messages posted, keeping statistics is a pressing issue that writing centers across the country are grappling with.

I had anticipated nice, neat numbers that I could plug into a chart and hand to my director. As a starting point, I grouped the responses from centers according to their institution's total enrollment and on how they reported estimated numbers, i.e., by students or by tutorials/visits, per semester.

The range of numbers that poured in from all over the country was eye opening. For example, a community

college in southern California with an enrollment of 19,029 students tutored 4,250 students per semester while another community college in California with a similar enrollment of 20,000 students tutored 519 students.

Among those writing centers reporting by number of visits/tutorials, a regional state college in Oklahoma with an enrollment of 4,300 students reported 2,200 tutorials in the fall semester, whereas a college in West Virginia

with a similar enrollment of 4,000 students reported 450 visits. However, a small church college in South Carolina with an enrollment of only 1,119 students reported 1,080 tutorials. To top it off, a brand new writing center at a university in Washington, D.C, with an enrollment of 5,358 students reported 1,349 visits in October alone!

So much for tidy, comparable numbers. How could there be such differences in tutoring statistics between writing centers? What could account for such a range in numbers? The more responses I received, the more I realized it would be impossible to do a comparative analysis. Why? Because there were so many different variables to consider, such as staffing, hours of operation, mandatory vs. voluntary visits, definition of tutorials, commuter vs. residential institution, and academic disciplines served.

Out of these, three key variables seemed to particularly impact the numbers: academic disciplines served, mandatory vs. voluntary visits, and definition of tutorials. For example, some colleges primarily serve English departments while others serve departments from all over their campus. Some universities' freshman year composition classes require students to visit writing centers, whereas other colleges' tutorials are strictly walk-ins. Further, some universities count only formal tutorials while others count informal, as well. Formal tutorials are typically a 30-minute, in-person appointment with a tutor. Informal tutorials consist of answering a question over the phone, giving out a handout, or helping a student use a computer. Online tutoring is gaining ground. Should these tutorials be defined as formal or informal? What is certain is that writing centers share common variables; what is not certain is how they are defined and thus counted.

From the online discussion, two terms emerged that warrant further

scrutiny: usage rate and student population rate. Usage rate refers to the actual number of students tutored divided by the number of tutorial appointments offered. For example, if 50 students are tutored and 100 appointments are offered, then a writing center's usage rate would be 50%. As reported on the listserv, it seems 50% is typical. Student population rate, on the other hand, refers to the actual number of students served by a writing center during a given semester as compared to the institution's total student body. As suggested by the listserv, 10% to 15% seems typical. For example, if a college's enrollment is 10,000, then its center should be serving 1,000 to 1,500 students per semester. Perhaps these two terms could be adopted as part of the statistical jargon for writing centers. And, if there is consensus, the two percentage rates could potentially set the standards for usage and service.

Here is the caveat. When used for their own individual institution, the above rates are straightforward. However, when they are used for comparison to other institutions, the rates become convoluted because writing centers have to take into account the previously discussed variables. In other words, if my college is serving 15% of the student population and that is the standard, then my number looks good. However, if I compare it to another college that is serving 30%, then my number looks poor. To do an accurate comparison, I would have to factor in if the other college's number reflected mandatory visits, all disciplines, and informal tutorials whereas my number reflected voluntary visits, English only, and formal tutorials.

Writing center professionals also raised important issues about the purpose of keeping statistics. There seemed to be some consensus that data needed to be collected for two purposes: 1.) reporting writing center use and activity and 2.) planning for changes, growth, and development.

The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, published in ten monthly issues from September to June by the Department of English, Purdue University, is a publication of the National Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement. ISSN 1040-3779. All Rights and Title reserved unless permission is granted by Purdue University. Material will not be reproduced in any form without express written permission.

Editor: Muriel Harris

Managing Editor: Mary Jo Turley
English Dept., Purdue University, 1356
Heavilon, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356
(765)494-7268.

e-mail: harrism@cc.purdue.edu
mjturley@purdue.edu

web site:<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/newsletter/index.html>

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 Managing Editor. Prepayment is requested for all subscriptions.

Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is 10-15 double-spaced typed pages, 3-5 pages for reviews, and 4 pages for the Tutors' Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. If possible, please send as attached files or as cut-and-paste in an e-mail to mjturley@purdue.edu. Otherwise, send a 3 and 1/2 in. disk with the file, along with the paper 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).

Further, many agreed that it was important to know when to use which data, based on the audience. Others voiced concern that statistics could be “dangerous” because they might be used to demonstrate that the writing center was not working to full potential or that its tutors were not tutoring all the time. Interestingly, a couple of participants on the listserv took this concept of low statistics and turned it on its head. They proposed that a successful writing center might actually diminish its numbers because confident writers feel less need to return to the center.

Despite the philosophical pros and cons of keeping numbers, it is apparent that writing centers are individually gathering data. Many of the respondents supported the use of statistics, saying numbers were a “rhetorically sound” way for writing center directors to defend and/or expand their budgets, staffing, and services. In other words, statistics provide persuasive factual

evidence. It is also apparent that writing centers need a standardization of measures or at least benchmarks. For example, I offered on the listserv to forward results from a survey on small college writing centers conducted in 1999. One morning alone, I had 41 emails from across the country, and even Europe, requesting the results. (Those results were published in Bruce Pegg, Shireen Carroll, and Steve Newmann’s “Size Matters: Administering a Writing Center in a Small Private College,” *Writing Lab Newsletter* 24.5 [January 2000]: 1-5.)

In doing any comparative analysis, it is critical that apples be compared to apples and oranges be compared to oranges. Currently, that is difficult, if not impossible, for writing centers. While statistics might be a double-edged sword, the real danger is not the statistics themselves, but in the possible misinterpretation. Standards—that are flexible enough to allow for the differ-

ent goals, missions, and philosophies of writing centers—would go a long way toward ensuring that statistics are used meaningfully. When shared, such standard measurements and terms would provide writing centers with much-needed benchmarking. When I posted my query, I had no idea that it would spark a national dialogue. As a result of this online discussion, we now know that a model for developing a joint statistical study exists. Thus, could the National Writing Center Association apply this model to develop a set of common measures that could be used jointly by writing centers? Ultimately, that is the question. Note: There were many voices that contributed to this online dialogue, and I hope my analysis has done them justice. I could not have written this article without their thoughtful insights. There are too many to list by name, but thanks and credit to you all.

*Rachel B. Perkes
Del Mar College
Corpus Christi, TX*

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

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)

March 3, 2001: Northern California Writing Centers Association, in Rohnert Park, CA
Contact: Scott L. Miller and Rose Gubele at the Sonoma State University Writing Center, 1801 E. Cotati Ave., Rohnert Park, CA 94928. Ph: 707-664-4401; e-mail: writing.center@sonoma.edu. Conference website: <<http://www.sonoma.edu/programs/writingcenter/nwca2001>>

March 23-24, 2001: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Granville, OH
Contact: Cindy Johaneck, English Dept, Denison University, Granville, OH 43023. Ph: 740-587-5793; e-mail johaneck@denison.edu. Conference website: <<http://www.denison.edu/ecwca2001>>

March 29-31, 2001: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Lafayette, LA

Contact: James McDonald, Department of English, P. O. Drawer 44691, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, LA 70504-4691. Phone: (337) 482-6907; e-mail: jcm5337@louisiana.edu

March 31, 2001: Northeast Writing Centers Association, in Worcester, MA
Contact: Anne Ellen Geller, Writing Center/Writing Program, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610, (508) 793-7469, angeller@clarku.edu. Conference website: <<http://www2.clarku.edu/resources/writingcenter/NEWCA/>>

June 18-20, 2001: European Writing Center Association, in Groningen, The Netherlands
Contact: e-mail: eataw.conference@let.rug.nl; fax: ++31.503636855. Conference website: <<http://www.hum.ku.dk/formidling/eataw/>>

Sept. 14-15, 2001: Midwest Writing Center Association, in Iowa City, IA
Contact: SuEllen Shaw, shaws@mnstate.edu, or Cinda Coggins, CCoggins66@aol.com. Conference website: <www.ku.edu/~MWCA>

Graduate student writing center administrators: Some concerns and proposals

As former graduate student administrators in college or university writing centers, we would like to draw attention to the relative invisibility of graduate student administrators in formal writing center publications and public forums. This lack of representation is striking since graduate students have played vital roles in the day-to-day operations of many writing centers for decades, and they have always been an integral part of the writing center community and its professional organizations. At this point in the development of the field, we think it is time to focus on the unique needs of graduate student administrators. Thus, this essay presents background information on graduate student administrators, offers some solutions proposed to the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA) Executive Board, and calls on the writing center community to further examine these issues.

Background

According to our preliminary research, approximately 80% of a representative sample of writing centers at institutions with graduate programs relies on graduate student tutors and/or administrators.¹ Many English graduate programs provide assistantships in writing centers, while others require participation in centers before or in conjunction with teaching assistantships. Moreover, writing centers are increasingly important sites of research and professional development for graduate students in many fields, including rhetoric and composition, English as a Second Language, and education.

The problem

Not only do graduate students perform numerous roles in writing centers, they also work from unique, and frequently tentative, positions. Admit-

tedly, many of the difficulties we outline are often experienced by faculty and staff administrators. However, it does not follow that because graduate and faculty/staff administrators face many of the same problems, graduate administrators can employ the same strategies for overcoming those obstacles. For example, they hold less authority and decision-making power than other administrators, often complicating and/or inhibiting their supervisory responsibilities and administrative efficacy.

Although administrative experience is invaluable for many graduate students, both they and the centers in which they work can be negatively impacted by graduate student administration. Graduate students usually hold their appointments on a year-to-year or term-to-term basis, necessarily affecting the stability of writing centers. There are rarely procedures to counteract the effects of such turnover, and a center's continuity and efficiency are often seen as goals antithetical to the needs and abilities of new graduate student administrators. Because graduate students must make timely progress toward degrees, the time they can dedicate to writing center work and research is often limited. Some graduate students are appointed to administrative positions when such work does not complement their area of scholarship, thus splitting students' professional and intellectual lives.

Overall, there is a serious lack of consistency among graduate student administrators' responsibilities and opportunities, issues seldom addressed in the field's professional literature. Graduate students are under-represented, if not absent, from our scholarly discussions despite the fact

that they provide valuable work for writing centers and in turn receive invaluable experiences.

Addressing the problem

We began discussing these concerns with other graduate student administrators in 1998 and have since attempted to address the problems by developing online resources² and presenting at national conferences.³ At CCC 2000, we conducted a pre-conference workshop which focused on professional development issues and sought input from graduate student administrators and faculty/staff directors who work with graduate assistants. Workshop participants addressed the scope of a graduate administrator's job while acknowledging the ways local contexts shape specific writing centers. All agreed that graduate student administrators should not be paper pushers or the sole administrator for a center. Rather, graduate student administrators should occupy an assisting role, and, according to context, have the opportunity to gain administrative experience, participate in tutor training and assessment, contribute to the development of the center and its programs, benefit from the mentorship of an experienced writing center or writing program administrator, and tailor center responsibilities and professional development opportunities to his/her individual needs. The support and suggestions we received from these participants led us to develop the following proposal, which we recently submitted to the NWCA Executive Board. We include an edited version of the proposal here, followed by updates on the outcome of the proposal.

The proposal

First, we propose that the NWCA Board include a graduate student repre-

sentative, with all the privileges and responsibilities such a position would entail. Given graduate students' high level of involvement in writing centers, a graduate representative would assure that graduate student concerns are addressed at the national level, as well as increase the efficacy of the NWCA Board through the addition of another vital perspective.

Second, we propose that the Graduate Student Writing Center Administrators listserv and web page be integrated more fully into existing NWCA resources and that NWCA help make these resources more widely known. Although NWCA relies on individuals and their home institutions to maintain its own web-based resources, it is more difficult for an individual graduate student to maintain such resources. Because her/his affiliation with an institution is relatively brief and access to institutional and technological support can be tenuous, we risk losing the pages and resources each time the current list owner and site manager moves to a new position or institution.

Third, we propose that more attention be given to the unique concerns of graduate student administrators in the public documents created by and for our profession. For example, a useful addition to the *Writing Center Resource Manual* would be a chapter that addresses professional development and management issues unique to graduate student administrators; it would also be useful for graduate students to participate in the writing and production of this chapter.

Fourth, we propose that the NWCA endorse a formal statement in direct support of graduate student administrators and their professional growth. Toward this end, we have included a draft of a statement modeled in part on Jeanne Simpson's 1985 article, "What Lies Ahead for Writing Centers: Position Statement on Professional Con-

cerns." Like Simpson's statement, ours outlines ideal conditions. Furthermore, while we appreciate the implicit support Simpson's statement provides for the healthy and productive working conditions of graduate students,⁴ we hope to make the needs of graduate students more explicit.

Proposed NWCA position statement on graduate student writing center administration⁵

1. Graduate students should not hold the top or sole administrative position in a writing center. Graduate students should instead be given writing center administrative roles at the assistant director, not director, position. Other titles such as coordinator, assistant coordinator, writing specialist, etc., might also be used, depending on local conditions. We also recognize that an assistant director position is often occupied by staff or faculty administrators. For purposes of discussion, we will refer to graduate student administrative positions as 'graduate student assistant director.' All administrative roles should adhere to the following guidelines.
2. Graduate assistant directorships should have formal, updated job descriptions written or approved by the director.
3. Graduate assistant directors should receive adequate training and preparation for the position. This could involve holding writing center roles that lead to the assistant directorship; ongoing training during the assistant directorship; development and use of resource material for graduate administrators; and/or appropriate coursework prior to the assistant directorship. Training is best done with a strong mentorship program. Whenever possible, connections between teaching and writing center work should

be discussed.

4. A faculty mentor—ideally the writing center director—should be directly involved with the assistant director's training and development. Mentoring should adjust to the assistant director's particular professional needs and interests.
5. Assistant directorships should include responsibilities that are vital to the work and vision of the writing center; assistant directorships should not be primarily clerical.
6. Assistant directorships should be assigned by the director (or with the director's input) to interested students. While the positions should not be limited to students in rhetoric and composition programs, they should be offered first to graduate students who are interested in writing center work and are interested in continuing in the field. An application process is encouraged.
7. Assistant directorships should include access to travel and/or research funds to encourage students' professional development.
8. Assistant directorships should be limited-term appointments that support students' needs to complete graduate degrees in a timely fashion.
9. Assistant directorships should be established within a clearly defined administrative structure so that assistant directors know to whom they are responsible (ideally, the director) and whom they supervise. If asked to supervise other graduate students, assistant directors should be fully supported by the director.
10. Assistant directors should be evaluated by directors or other appropriate faculty members on an annual basis, and the evaluation should be included in students' graduate files.
11. Graduate assistant directors

should receive the same pay rate as graduate students with teaching assistantships.

12. Assistant directorships should incorporate research and publication opportunities.

Where we stand and where we're going

These four proposals were submitted to the NWCA Executive Board at the NWCA 2000 Conference, and the first three proposals were passed unanimously. In the first case, the Board agreed to "convert" an existing at-large seat to a graduate student at-large seat. Second, Bruce Pegg, the web master for NWCA's web site, agreed to incorporate the Graduate Student Writing Center Administrators listserv and web page into the NWCA web site, and, third, the General Editor of NWCA Press, Byron Stay, agreed that a chapter focusing on graduate student administrative concerns should be included in the next edition of the *Writing Center Resource Manual*, currently in the revision process. Finally, the Board agreed to discuss the proposed Position Statement further and include the statement on the agenda for the next Board meeting at CCCC 2001. While we hope the Board will formally endorse the statement, we also believe that individual directors can use this document immediately to inform and extend their work with graduate administrators.

In the end, the Position Statement does not seek to constrain individual centers with mandated guidelines, but instead encourages departments, programs, centers, and directors to attend to the professional development of graduate student administrators. Such work will eventually lead to better prepared writing center directors and, in turn, more successful writing centers. Writing centers simply do not benefit from graduate student administrators who are not effectively trained, who are unconnected from other student-administrators, who receive little encouragement to pursue writing center re-

search, or who remain relatively invisible to the professional organizations. Writing center directorships are increasingly being filled by those who gained writing center experience in graduate programs. To be vibrant sites of practice and research, writing centers depend on experienced and knowledgeable leadership from directors prepared to face the institutional and intellectual challenges of effective and creative administration.

These are exciting developments, and the enthusiasm and interest demonstrated during our various workshops, presentations, and hallway discussions at conferences indicate that we are not the only ones who believe so. We look forward to continuing the conversation with others in the writing center community as this issue finally receives the attention it deserves.

Julie Eckerle
(ecker014@tc.umn.edu)— University of
Minnesota — Minneapolis, MN

Karen Rowan (kr7238@albany.edu) —
State University of New York —
Albany, NY

Shevaun Watson
(watsons1@muohio.edu) — Miami
University — Oxford, OH

(Ed. note: For those interested in responding to the authors' invitation to continue the conversation on this topic, the authors' e-mail addresses are included above. And they welcome comments.)

Work Cited

Simpson, Jeanne. "What Lies Ahead for Writing Centers: Position Statement on Professional Concerns." *Landmark Essays on Writing Centers*. Ed. Christina Murphy and Joe Law. Davis, CA: Hermagoras, 1995. 57-61.

Notes

¹ The representative sample included all of the writing centers that were

linked to the NWCA homepage when the research was conducted in 1998. Currently, one of the writers, Shevaun Watson, is pursuing funding for a more comprehensive study on the extent of graduate student involvement in writing centers.

² Kendra Banks Perry, who was instrumental in our early efforts to address these issues, created The Graduate Student Writing Center Administrators listserv and web page. These resources can be accessed at <http://home.earthlink.net/~bibliophiles/wc.htm>.

³ Shevaun Watson, Andrea Deacon, Charles Schuster, Nancy Grimm, and Nancy Barron presented "Making the Invisible Visible: The Role of Writing Centers in Graduate Education" at CCCC 1999, and Kendra Banks Perry, Julie Eckerle, and Karen Rowan presented "Giving a Voice to the Graduate Student Writing Center Administrator" at NWCA 1999.

⁴ Simpson suggests that directorships be faculty positions and hopes that her statement will "encourage a trend toward graduate programs that provide specific training for writing center directors" (58).

⁵ The authors would like to thank all of those in the writing center community who have supported and contributed to our work on these issues. We are especially grateful to Jon Olson for his responses to drafts of the proposal presented here and his continued mentorship.

Is your subscription expiring?

Check the date above your name in the mailing label on the last page of this issue. You may be "expiring," and we wouldn't want such a horrible thing happening to you. (Besides, we'd miss you!) To re-subscribe, if necessary, contact Mary Jo Turley (see information on page 2).

TUTORS' COLUMN

Ethical missteps, conflicting worldviews, power and silence

Part I: Liberation pedagogy

Summer in the writing center is usually a pretty relaxed time. Not too much tutoring happens, but the appointments that we do have tend to be some of the most atypical. I think this is because the summer writers are usually new to college, taking the introductory writing course early; and the tutors are usually more lethargic, more inclined to let the writer have most of the control of the session. There's something about the combination of lazy tutoring, and writers who are eager to "get ahead" through summer courses, that makes for a unique tutoring dynamic that I don't see during the rest of the school year. The tutor/writer relationship becomes more friendly, less businesslike. I think that some of the most interesting and troubling appointments happen at these times, when our guard is down, when we're a little distracted by the weather, or by the end of the semester, by final exams and vacations. The more unusual things seem to happen when we're not ready to think about them and reflect on them. We'll say, "That was strange," and move on to whatever else is on our minds. I want to get this all down before I forget it.

I tutored a man yesterday, I'll say his name is "Joe." He was probably in his late forties, balding and graying. He was coming back to school after already graduating years ago with a degree in computer science. He had been teaching automotive repair at a post-secondary technical school, and he decided that he wanted to teach in the high schools instead. In order to accomplish his goal, he had to take more college classes, which was why he was here in the summertime, taking two

classes in the general education program. He said, "I found that most of what we taught at the technical school was a result of poor teaching at the high school level. And I'm the kind of guy, I want to be a part of the solution. I don't want to be part of the problem."

He came to me with paper assignments for both the Western Literature survey course, and the Western Civilizations survey course. He said both classes were irrelevant. He said, "I look at these teachers, and I say they only have jobs because people like me are forced to take their classes. You can't do anything with this. What I teach, you can take out into the world and make money."

Money seemed to be the bottom line. That did not bode well for our relationship, as I have trouble even remembering to fill out my time sheet here. I like to think that getting paid is a necessary but not a primary concern for me, as it seemed to be for Joe. I'm used to being poor. I wasn't sure what to say. I searched for some way to engage him in the assignments, some perspective we could use that might ease his resistance. But the appointment became one in which he told me his worldviews (what he thought was important and unimportant), and I tried to subtly suggest the benefits of the general education program for everyone, even for him, while trying not to be too heavy-handed with my own opposing views. He showed me two essays about the origins of civilization he found to be exceptionally irrelevant. They both discussed the possibility that Western civilization was influenced by African civilizations, that Greece had its roots in Egypt. He said, "This is bullshit.

Why do I care? Leave history for the historians. I'm in the real world."

I felt very sad for him when he said this, but I didn't press the issue. I decided to let him think what he wanted. But what he seemed to be saying to me was, "I am not concerned with where civilization started. It makes no difference to me whether it began in Europe or Africa. That is a problem that does not leave the classroom, and I am in the 'real world,' outside of the classroom, where you need to make money." Even while Joe never hesitated to speak his mind, and sometimes to very aggressively express his opinions, this statement, to me, was an acceptance of powerlessness and silence.

I think this is where Joe's professors failed him, and where I failed him, too. Nobody tried to make him see just how deeply his life and his ways of thinking were affected by questions like, "Where did civilization originate: Europe, Africa, Asia?" He felt that it was just some intellectual exercise with no real connection to anything. But what those questions are really asking us to do (and this is something I didn't talk to Joe about) is to examine where we are right now, and to look at how our understanding of the world has been constructed, how it has been constructed *for* us. What could be more real than that?

How does a belief that Progress started in Europe contribute to Eurocentric attitudes?

How does that belief make me feel really good about myself, as a white person, believing that "we" (white people) are the masters of our own past

and future, that we are the creators of so much Progress?

How does that affect our everyday interactions with non-white people?

What are the implications of believing that African cultures also had some influence on Western civilization? Or that that's where the Western World began? How then must racial attitudes be reconfigured? How have racial attitudes changed since, say, *Heart of Darkness* was written? Why have they changed?

I think that's the point of reading such essays in a Western Civilization class. It can be a really empowering experience to see for the first time where our ideas have come from and to see that we are in control of changing what we think. Joe said he would rather not question where his ideas came from: "Leave history to the historians. I'm in the real world." My reading of this statement was that Joe would rather let someone else decide what he should think. This made me think that Joe has shut down. He has stopped asking questions, and he has focused his attention on goals: "This is what I want, and this is what I need to do to get it." He has resigned himself to "getting by" in the real world.

It is important to point out here that the person I am writing about is not really Joe—he is my reading of Joe. I come to every tutoring session with my own assumptions about the world, and it is inevitable that these assumptions color my interpretations of what students say to me; they even color my interpretations of history assignments. I cannot ignore my worldview, and I cannot speak for Joe nor for what Joe thinks. I can only look at Joe through my own lens, even as I try to be objective. For example, I tried to be sympathetic to Joe while I tutored him, and to see things the way he saw them, but these were the thoughts that ran through my head while he talked: "getting by" is a survival tactic, the need to maintain. It means that we do what it

takes to keep our heads above water. When we concern ourselves with getting by, it is because we are set in a certain lifestyle for whatever reasons, and we feel forced to make a living which will maintain that lifestyle. Joe seemed to have resigned himself to survival.

These are the thoughts that ran through my head while he talked: oppressed people stay oppressed because they are so caught up with survival in an existing social order that they cannot afford to take the time to question or challenge that order: While I oppose my unfair working conditions, who will feed my children? I'm not saying that Joe is suffering from so much oppression. He is a college graduate, he has taught at a post-secondary school. He is in a relatively powerful social position. He has options. But I saw an opportunity while working with him to encourage him to be critical about the world, not to accept a career teaching automotive repair just because it is useful and it makes money. I saw an opportunity to empower a student voice, but I did not take it. Why?

I am not a political activist (or am I?). I am only a writing tutor (is there a difference?).

Part II: Ethics

Joe took the two history essays out of his bag after we had finished talking about another assignment he needed help with, a critical paper on *Oedipus Rex*, for his Western Literature class. So it was only the last half hour or so of the appointment when we turned to the "irrelevant" history class he was taking. When he took out the two essays, he said he was frustrated that he had to write a summary of them. He didn't even want to read them. In fact, he was so frustrated, he said that he was tempted to find someone who liked to read history, or who was good at it, and tell that person to name a price. He said he'd pay someone (me?) to write the assignment, as long as he could be sure that it was done carefully and correctly. He wasn't asking me to

tutor him on the history assignment. He knew what he had to do. He took it out of his bag just to say this to me. Was he offering me money to write his paper for him?

Ethics is a topic we don't discuss much in this writing center, but you see it written about in writing center literature, and there seems to always be a presentation on "Writing Center Ethics" at the New England Writing Centers Association (NEWCA) conferences. When we do talk about it, it's usually in reference to some isolated incident like this one, where one tutor had one experience in which academic honesty became an issue. Then we talk about it and come to some consensus that the tutor handled the situation in the best possible manner, considering they were on the spot like that. There are no general guidelines or policies to follow, other than "don't write their papers for them."

I wasn't expecting him to offer me money to do his work. It was like the floor fell out from under me. I had no answer, no idea how these situations were to be handled. There were no general guidelines or policies to follow. I kept my eyes glued on his assignment sheet, for fear that any eye contact would be misconstrued as some illicit agreement between us. It was bad enough that I already didn't know what to say to a man who didn't share my views about the empowering possibilities of a college education; now I had to make this appointment productive in light of his offer, too.

What was he thinking? Can I get him in trouble for this? He is a teacher. He knew he overstepped his boundaries. When I didn't acknowledge his subtle request, he acted as though he were only saying in passing that the class was a waste of his time. He said, "In any case, that's just what I think. But I know that when you're in school, there are going to be things you have to do that you don't want to. It's the same as in high school. It's a discipline. You have to realize that in order to get

where you want to be, you have to get these things out of the way." Who was he trying to convince?

I was wondering what my proper response should be. Should I get him in trouble? Instead, I thought first, "I could use the money." And then I thought about what that would have meant for the writing center, to have tutors who will accept cash under the table in exchange for academic dishonesty, and to have that kind of information passed around the college, that money is the bottom line for us, too. I could have offered my services to him so easily, and for a fairly high price I'm sure, based on his frustrations. But I thought, why am I here? Why am I talking to this man right now? As idealistic as it may sound, our writing center, along with many others, is based on empowerment through writing. I'm committed to listening to and validating the voices of writers who sometimes feel like they don't have a voice, a feeling that can manifest itself in comments as straightforward and typical as, "I'm no good at writing. I don't have anything to say," or in complicated and resistant ways like, "Leave history for the historians. I'm in the real world." I thought what having me write a paper for money would have meant for Joe. He would like to get through these few classes with as little work as possible, and he would never take the chance (he didn't want the chance) of putting his ideas into writing. He was silenced by "the real world," to the point where he would have let me speak for him, but I decided not to say anything. Until now anyway.

III. Survival

What's most interesting to me about all of this lies in the implications of ethical missteps and conflicting worldviews on the interaction between the tutor and writer. You see, I have this faulty perception of what ideally happens in a tutoring session. I like to think that, when I sit down to tutor, I and the student both stop being whole

people, in a way. We assume the roles of Tutor and Writer, and we let go of all the other roles for a while. This is obviously impossible, if only because how we think about and talk about writing is invariably bound up in how we think about and talk about the rest of our lives. My own morals, ethics, and philosophies, as well as Joe's, kept asserting themselves during this appointment. I couldn't help but interact with him on a person-to-person level. My own ideals couldn't be ignored as long as his were being so insistent. This created a wall between us. What could I have done?

Like Joe, I too resorted to survival. To me, Joe's aggressive resistance to writing—the feeling that it was impractical and a waste of his time—stemmed from the same kind of common feelings that other students have about writing, as seen in statements like, "I'm not a writer," or "I've never been any good at writing." When we tutor students who say these things, part of our job is to help them become more comfortable with hearing and using their own writing voice, by saying things like, "Well, when *do* you write?" or "In what ways *are* you a writer?" But with a more aggressive expression of silence, like Joe's, I balked. I didn't suggest to him that writing could mean much more to him than just intellectual exercise, that it could be a source of power for him. I didn't say to him, in any way, any of the things that I thought, any of the things that I'm writing here. I swallowed them. I did not speak, and I did not encourage Joe to speak or to write. Instead, I sympathized. I said, "Yeah, it's going to be tough for me to make a living with a degree in English," and, "I'll bet every freshman who takes these classes thinks the same thing you do." I checked the clock to see how much time we had left.

How many times do we tutor, aware of the possibilities for change, only to become complacent during the appointment, and to just get by with

whatever is good enough? We choose not to say things, and then attribute our own silence to the specific tutoring dynamic. I could list any number of things about my tutoring relationship with Joe which discouraged me from doing more than "getting by." I could say he had a very aggressive personality and very strong opinions about things. He commanded a lot of space: he leaned forward when he spoke, and he used his hands a lot. He was bigger than I am. I didn't feel like I could talk to him as a peer.

But such a list is not very helpful to me. The specific tutor/student dynamic does influence what we decide to do in a session, since we are forced to react to the situation at hand before we can really consider the theories behind our reaction. But it doesn't give me much to go on . . .

These are my questions for other peer tutors:

- What *is* the difference between a writing tutor and a political activist?
- Is it a tutor's role to question the assumptions that students have about the world, as those assumptions affect the student's ability to write, and to write well?
- How do you tutor differently students who feel unsure of themselves as writers, who seem to need just a little encouragement, versus students who actively dislike writing, who seem antagonistic?
- Is it enough sometimes just to "get by"? If yes, then are we really helping? How?

*Jay Peters
Rhode Island College
Providence, RI*

When writing centers mind their own business: A cautious comparison

In his article, “The Writing Center as Managerial Site,” Ronald Heckleman broaches the touchy subject of comparing writing center directors to business managers, and by extension, comparing writing centers to businesses. His use of Stephen Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* is intended to outline the “general characteristics of an effective manager” that he believes “we can usefully relate to writing centers” (2). Few, if any, writing center professionals may be eager to share philosophies, practices and even terminology with the business world, whose participants we’ve come to stereotype as shrewd policy makers and enforcers; decision makers with vision toward quantities and final products; unscrupulous players with a supply-and-demand, bottom-line-margin mentality. Heckleman, however, urges us to consider some of the issues common to both fields, which he believes will work toward “demystify(ing) the concept of management as it applies to writing and especially to writing centers” (1).

Heckleman’s article breaks important ground in the writing-center-as-business debate, and as writing center professionals, we must at least acknowledge the possible connections between business and writing center management styles, which he addresses. We also need to ask tough questions like, “Can we make comparisons between businesses and writing centers?” and if so, then “What can we learn from the business world to improve what we do in the writing center world?” and “How can we incorporate ideas from the outside without compromising the intellectual integrity of our own field?” Whether these questions cause us to reaffirm or rethink our attitudes toward the idea of writing centers as managerial sites, they surely lend themselves

to the kind of self-reflection indicative of effective writing center directors. In our attempt to answer some of the questions we have posed, we intend to discuss a comparison directed specifically toward the issue of policy-making, since this is the area where we believe writing centers and business operations share the most similarities. We do not intend this article as an argument for melding our writing center tutoring philosophy with that of the typical small business. A full-blown comparison would eventually break down because the nature of the relationship between a writing center and students and that of the business and the customer is different. The similarity in comparison lies more with the internal structure of the organization, and in this respect writing centers can learn a great deal about improving their policy issues through an understanding of those used by non-academic organizations.

For most businesses, specific written policies are included in employee handbooks and discussed at length in orientation training seminars. They address issues that speak to the employee’s role in the organization and, more directly, to the employees responsibilities in the workplace. Such handbooks represent the first step in establishing clear lines of communication so that everyone involved is working under the same set of assumptions. In like manner, writing centers conduct tutor training courses and create tutor handbooks in order to prepare new hires to carry out the duties of their jobs. The information contained in tutor handbooks, as we have discovered in recent years, is not always as clear and decipherable as we might think. And we cannot possibly expect tutors to absorb every shred of information we tend to throw at them over the

course of a one-week or a one-semester training period. When tutors do not fully understand the impact of their positions or the consequences of not fulfilling their obligations, then we need to examine the effectiveness of our policies. Specific written policies are the only fair and consistent way to regulate the tutor’s actions. These same policies might also gauge whether or not directors are effective managers of the workplace. As we look to the future of writing center operations, then, we must also look to the past and learn from both our successes and our short-comings. The policies we create and recreate should reflect, for example, the growth of our center’s operations, the increase in its tutoring staff, and the introduction of tutoring students in all disciplines. The policies that we write into our tutor handbooks, like those found in business-oriented employee handbooks, should also address problem areas such as tutoring responsibilities, scheduling issues, and professional development. A writing center environment that supports the internal operating structure and makes clear the expectations of all personnel will most likely function in such a way that the students who come to us for help will feel confident that they have made the right decision in asking for our assistance.

When the Writing Center was established at the University of Michigan-Flint in 1971, it was intended to be self sufficient, without policy. That was a time when people were suspicious of policy, and an academic institution’s policy was no exception. In fact, the only policy the early Writing Center adopted was designed to answer the question: What will most benefit the student? There was no need for policies regarding tutor conduct, tutor responsibilities, or tutor expectations.

With four tutors, two professors, and one manager, communication was not a problem. Responsibility was not an issue. They all worked so closely together that a system of checks and balances naturally existed. In "A Writing Laboratory Model," Patrick Hartwell describes the infant Writing Center at UM-Flint. He notes:

Inevitably, the atmosphere of the Writing Laboratory was loose and informal, occasionally plain noisy. Writing samples just completed (by students) were often read to others working in the laboratory; questions would be shouted out and problems shared; there was a constant sense of writing as an activity and a mode of communication. We had insisted that confidence-building be a primary goal, and it was a general rule that no negative comments were made about a piece of writing to the student, at least for the first part of his time in the laboratory. (64)

Much has changed in our Writing Center since 1971. It is no longer referred to as a lab; the director position is now occupied by a tenure-track writing specialist; we work with developmental writers, and we are a cross-curricular center for tutoring; we employ a staff of 24 undergraduate and 2 graduate tutors; we occupy more space than when we opened (although not much). One factor, however, has remained relatively constant throughout our twenty-seven years of operation: we operate with relatively few written policies.

As we recently began revising our tutor training handbook—an in-house publication for new employees which explains basic operations, procedures, and a few policies—we realized that we had almost no formal written policies to turn to when problems arise. During discussion in a subsequent staff meeting on the subject, several tutors suggested that if their responsibilities and expectations were more clearly outlined in the training handbook, they

would gain a better understanding of the roles they are asked to perform. One tutor, who also worked at the GAP, a popular clothing store, brought in the Store Employee Handbook to show us how a business presents policies and procedures to its staff. While much of the handbook is peppered with sales and customer service jargon, we found some useful information that could actually help us clarify and strengthen our own approach to establishing and enforcing writing center policy. By examining principle components of the GAP Store Employee Handbook and company operating procedures—including responsibilities, corrective action policy and self-evaluation—we hope to illustrate ways in which writing centers can adopt such principles to our specific needs when establishing our own written policies. It is important to note that we chose the GAP handbook not because we believe it to be the ideal model (in fact we haven't found an ideal model), but because it offered moments of clarity on issues we struggled with at the time. Our hope in sharing the usefulness of this particular model in reshaping our policy decisions at UM-Flint is that others will at least pause to consider the possibilities that exist for improving the business of writing center operations.

Responsibilities

Tutors hired to work in a writing center may not be handed a written job description that explains the details of their responsibilities. More likely, their responsibilities as tutors are presented, discussed, read about, role played, and practiced in a training workshop or in a semester-long seminar. This approach works well for introducing new tutors into the profession because they are exposed to a mix of philosophy and practice, and the experience offers them a glimpse of the big picture of how a writing center operates. The problem, however, is that while tutors' responsibilities are usually fulfilled in a professional manner, sometimes they are not. And when these responsibili-

ties are not written down for everyone's reference, tutors can develop a confused sense of what is expected of them, and directors are left without a way to determine if their tutors are fulfilling their responsibilities. For example, our handbook said very little about being late or absent from a shift. As a result, we were sometimes short-handed because the tutors did not have guidelines for finding someone to cover for them. Comprehensive statements about such guidelines would help correct these problems. In the GAP employee handbook, job responsibilities are presented at the very beginning and in unmistakably clear fashion. They are categorized, easy to read, and accompanied by brief explanations. The presentation of responsibilities is impressive in that it combines the company's philosophy, mission, and objectives with specific expectations for each employee.

The employees at the GAP aren't just taught how to sell jeans. They understand the importance of their role in the success of the entire company because the big picture is presented to them. The company believes them to be an important part of the system and, as a result, the employee feels important. When an employer moves beyond an out-of-context list of responsibilities toward a meaningful look at the individual's role in successfully operating a company, it most likely indicates that the employer values the important work performed by the employees. In like manner, if we expect tutors to fulfill their roles in specific ways, then we have an obligation to clearly state those expectations in writing. Making sure tutors always know the job requirements and exactly what is expected of them will allow any writing center to run more reliably and efficiently. Written responsibilities work to clarify hazy or unclear duties. Jeannette Harris argues for the importance of a comprehensive writing center handbook, in part, because it would force the director to articulate policy acts, undoubtedly, as a method of com-

munication between supervisors and employees (145). At UM-Flint, we recently created a new description of responsibilities based on what tutors were presented with in the tutor training seminar. The job responsibilities directly reflect the center's philosophy of an inquiry and collaboration approach to tutoring, and they work toward fulfilling our mission of helping all writers at all levels work toward advancing their writing abilities:

- Keep attitudes towards work and other employees of the center socially acceptable—regardless of your personal opinion towards each other.
- Tutor developmental writing students as outlined in the handbook.
- Answer the phone when the secretary is unavailable.
- Schedule appointments if necessary.
- Complete a self-evaluation at the end of every semester.
- Adhere to your schedule. You must call two hours before the start of your shift when you will not be at work. You also need to call when you will be late.
- Do not use the phone to conduct your social life.
- Please attend staff meetings and Grading Day as they are mandatory.
- Respect fellow tutors. Do not second guess or belittle tutors in front of students. If you have an issue, please resolve it privately. If a problem arises, discuss the matter with Scott or Bob.
- Never work in the writing center alone after 5 o'clock.
- Fill out time sheets honestly so they accurately reflect the hours you actually spent in the writing center.

Toward an appropriate discipline policy

Policies that help employees fulfill responsibilities aren't helpful if there is a lack of accountability or a lack of consequences for not completing job duties. In like manner, a writing center manager or director could unknowingly adopt managing habits that are weak and unfair—due to insufficient

support and the inevitable inconsistency in handling discipline problems—without the support of a discipline policy. Tutors are less likely to acknowledge rules and responsibilities without a clear statement of accountability, and a manager can't fairly correct the problems without a policy to support her. An understandable and consistent discipline policy complements our proposed responsibilities. The GAP, which refers to its discipline policy as "corrective action," imposes a "three strikes" structure, which is commonly used by other businesses as well (29). First offenses are handled with a verbal warning. This is simply a discussion between the supervisor and employee to ensure that adequate communication about the problem exists. Second offenses result in a written warning, which serves as yet another channel of communication and physical documentation of the problem. The same issue occurring three times warrants termination with the reasoning that the employee can no longer (or no longer wants to) effectively perform his job duties (29-30). This structure offers the employee opportunities to discuss his actions and make necessary adjustments in behavior.

Although the GAP structure serves as a helpful model, or at least a useful starting point, we are fully aware that the goals and philosophies that make up discipline policies are very different in the writing center field. Use of the term "corrective action" doesn't clearly address our needs in the center. For example, we see the idea of a discipline policy more as a way to establish a clear sense of accountability with our staff and less as a "three strikes" or "you have three chances to screw up" approach to establishing a productive work environment. Our writing center has developed a discipline procedure based loosely on the GAP model. However, instead of using the verbal warning, the written warning, and termination, we have created a system more conducive to and consistent with a writing center's operation. If for example, a tutor doesn't show up for

work and doesn't notify the writing center manager in advance, then the director will meet with the tutor, reminding her of her responsibilities to both the center and to the students. This discussion serves as a first step in the discipline process. We do not call it a verbal warning.

If after speaking with the director, a tutor continues to miss work and does not notify the manager, the director will meet with the tutor a second time. At this point, the director has two options. First, he might reduce the tutor's scheduled hours for a specified period of time. Since many tutors rely on the wages offered by our center, they can ill afford to work on a reduced schedule. Our experience has often been that when problems arise or persist with a given tutor, circumstances beyond the writing center are usually at play. Ours is a commuter campus, and many students, in addition to taking a full load of classes, find jobs off campus as well as in the writing center to make ends meet. The pressure is often great to keep everything in balance. The director's second option, then, is to suggest that a tutor facing discipline problems take some time off to work at re-establishing their balance. This approach works well because it is not punitive. In fact, it creates a nurturing situation for solving the problem in a realistic manner. Finally, and this has happened only twice in our twenty-seven years of existence at UM-Flint, if a tutor's problems (or lack of attention to them) continue to interfere with the work environment, and if the director has exhausted all of the above options, the tutor will be terminated. Since we are not operating under the same rules as a typical business, writing centers can be more flexible when dealing with discipline problems. UM-Flint's writing center is as much a training ground for developing professionals as it is a place for students to receive writing assistance. Tutors make mistakes as they grow into their roles. Helping them learn from their mistakes instead of punishing them should not

only be our goal, it should be our first responsibility as managers or directors.

Self-evaluation

The GAP uses a management evaluation of employees where the manager rates the employee's job performance. The employee evaluations are based on specific aspects of clothing retail. Because employee raises are based on these evaluations, it would be self-defeating to have the employees rate themselves. The goals of such top-down evaluations are, primarily, to fire employees or give them raises. The writing center, however, has different goals in mind with evaluations, and these goals can be achieved with self-evaluation. Self-evaluation can act as an effective tool for examining both short-term performance as well as long-term growth and development. A good self-evaluation procedure can also provide an effective communication tool for tutors and managers. Self-evaluations serve several purposes by forming an effective communication link between tutors and directors. First and foremost, self-evaluations alert supervisors to potential problems. These problems could range from tutors who are not satisfied with their jobs to procedural problems with the center itself—both of which could be solved before escalating. The self-evaluation can also encourage tutors to become more conscious of their responsibilities as writing tutors and to take an active role in problem-solving. Perhaps the

self-evaluations may allow for introspective improvements within the work of each writing tutor that wouldn't ordinarily take place. Our example of a self-evaluation includes a section based on rules where the tutor rates herself on coming prepared and on time for work, following rules in general, and attending staff meetings. In essence, the self-evaluation becomes an extension of the responsibilities and policies on discipline. The second section is a measure of how effective the tutor feels she has been, based on, for example, communication skills, problem-solving skills, motivation, and interest in the job. The tutor is also given the opportunity to add any additional comments she feels are necessary.

Some self-evaluation items include:

- communication skills
- problem-solving skills
- motivation
- cooperation with students
- cooperation with other staff members
- attendance
- attending staff meetings
- following rules of employment

Conclusion

The addition of clearly defined work rules and corrective action policies will most likely help tutors become more responsible and accountable in their work environment. If writing center tutors can accommodate the rules while keeping their sense of individuality,

then the center can continue to maintain professionalism while promoting enthusiastic learning. If a policy is not implemented into the framework of the writing center, then the future success of the center is uncertain. Without rules or guidelines to accommodate the inevitable growth (because of its initial success), the operation of the center opens itself up to unnecessary chaos. Or it will, at least, become a writing center that is not as successful at providing writing assistance as it could be.

*Bob Barnett and Jacquelyn Kleinedler
University of Michigan-Flint
Flint, MI*

Works Cited

- Harris, Jeanette. "The Handbook as a Supplement to a Tutor Training Program." *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1984. 144-151.
- Hartwell, Patrick. "A Writing Lab Model." *Basic Writing: Essays for Teachers, Researchers, and Administrators*. Ed. Lawrence N. Kasden and Daniel R. Hoerber. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1980. 63-73.
- Heckleman, Ronald. "The Writing Center as Managerial Site." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 23.1 (Sept. 1998): 1-4.
- Store Employee Handbook For the Employees of Gap, Gapkids, Banana Republic, and Old Navy Clothing Co.* Dec. 1994.

Writing Under the Sun

Call for Proposals
April 14, 2001
Winter Park, FL
Keynote speaker: Twila Papay

The goal of this conference is to develop a community among Central Florida writing centers and to look into starting a state association of writing centers. Proposals are welcome for half-hour presentations by tutors/consultants as well as writing center directors, faculty, and writers. (If more time is needed, please indicate this in the proposal.) Proposals should include name, address, phone, and e-mail of contact person; 250-word abstract; list of participants and equipment needed. Mail proposals and/or questions to Rebecca Rieve, Thomas P. Johnson Student Resource Center, Rollins College, 1000 Holt Avenue—2613, Winter Park, FL 32789-4499 or e-mail Sylvia Whitman, swhitman@rollins.edu; phone: 407-646-1538. Deadline postmark Feb. 20, 2001.

Something from nothing: The story (I love to tell) of the development of the Writing Lab at Chowan College

In the summer of 1983 my younger brother and only sibling advised me of the propitiousness of my family's spending some time with my father whose health was rapidly deteriorating. Thus, we traveled from our relatively new home in eastern North Carolina to my childhood home in west Tennessee. During the month we spent there and were forced to witness the ravages of Parkinson's disease, some days were bad, others worse, and on one of the "worse" days, our pastor called. As I listened to my husband, John, speaking with the pastor, Tom, I heard not half a conversation but only a quarter. After the call was completed, my husband explained why I would hear him begin a sentence and stop, then say, "Well, yes, Tom, that's exactly how it is," or "How did you know what I was about to say?" I would hear John seemingly begin with the verb or even the object of the sentence, especially if the object were a quotation from my father. What had been happening between my husband and our pastor was that they had been "sharing the story."

In this case the story was of Parkinson's, for Tom's father had also suffered the debilitating effects of the disease. Two men, his father and mine, separated by years and miles, in fact different if measured by almost any sociological yardstick—except gender—were the same. All the medical information I had been able to obtain about the disease in general, all the medical information I had been able to obtain about the disease and my father in particular, all the clinical data available to me paled when compared to that phone call, the sharing of the story. Certainly, we appreciated the AT&T suggestion that someone had reached out and touched us, but that touching was particularly important because it let us know that my father was not unique;

our situation was not unusual; we were not alone in our experience. The story was important, and the sharing of the story was important—for the one telling and the one listening.

Whatever the form and content, the story is important. By allowing the author to objectify an experience that the audience shares, it is important psychologically in its therapeutic value for the individual. By permitting diverse peoples from varied traditions to explain, preserve, and transmit their cultures, it is important sociologically in its historical value for the community. I love to tell a story. I'm a Southerner, and as Pulitzer Prize winning author Tom Stribling once wrote, "the true Southerner by nature runs . . . to . . . words. He is geographically a storyteller because he has a great tragic story to tell. But if he had no story at all, he would still [tell it]—a lot of Southerners do." I run to words. In the words of nineteenth century hymn writer Katherine Hankey, "I love to tell the story."

When first confronted with writing the annual report of Chowan College's Writing Lab, I was relieved that my confronter, the English department chairperson, suggested that I might want to compose a prose narrative rather than just record facts and figures. Knowing that he knew me, I suspected he was acknowledging my desire/need to tell the story, but I also suspected he realized—as I—that the quantities were not going to be adequate to measure the quality. Since that first report in 1990, during which time the quantities have steadily increased, I have continued to include the story as the true measure of the quality. These anecdotal pieces have far more accurately measured the value of the lab than mere numbers. If the

Southerner has a great, tragic story to tell, so surely the Writing Lab Director has a great story to tell, sometimes tragic, sometimes comic but always great. "I love to tell the story" to those who have not heard.

The story begins in the spring of 1989. In order to substantiate compliance with the college's regional accrediting agency's expected educational result of graduating students who "demonstrate expository writing with correct grammar, punctuation, and logical organization," the English division of the Department of Language and Literature proposed (in reaction to various unpleasant suggestions for methods of establishing compliance) a writing lab. The writing lab was to serve as a means by which any student who had completed freshman composition but was found—by any professor—to be deficient in writing skills would undergo remediation prior to graduation. In fact, such a student would not graduate unless he or she could produce "expository writing" judged to be acceptable by at least three members of the English faculty.

So the lab was conceived in the spring and after a brief gestation born in the fall of 1989; it began life in the broom-closet-sized office I had been assigned as an adjunct instructor. My compensation was the same as that for teaching one class, but rather than the three hours per week I would have met a class of twenty-five students, I was expected to be available for eight hours each week to meet with whatever number appeared (with or without appointments) at my door. Supplies consisted of a dictionary and a *Harbrace Handbook*. All that was needed was students, and the students came. I immediately discovered that eight hours was not enough time, and no matter which

hours were established as lab hours, they were not the ones needed to mesh with the students' schedules.

The first official referral occurred approximately two weeks into the semester. After grading the first test he administered, a new instructor called: "I have a student I think needs to come to your lab." Those words, music to my ears, moved me to immediate action. First, I determined that the student met the criteria as someone who needed the lab (the writing sample left no doubt about the need); then I checked with the Registrar and discovered he fit the criteria (he was not currently enrolled in a composition course). I readied for the student's coming; I anticipated his coming; I waited expectantly. He did not come; I contacted the professor; he had given the student the student's copy of the referral form, but he hadn't seen the student since he gave the student the copy. Another check with the Registrar revealed that the student had withdrawn. Follow-up information from the student's advisor revealed that the student knew he had problems with writing and was determined not to write. He thought he had solved his problems by not taking composition; he was probably chagrined at finding that composition class or no, he would have to write. So much for the first referral.

This story, a part of the story, might make one think I had nothing to do; such was hardly the case, and the above sequencing of events suggests a more rapid occurrence than reality reveals. Although the student was the first official referral and the first supposed to make use of the lab, had he come, he would not have been the first student to use the Writing Lab, and during the unfolding of his story, other students were already using the Writing Lab. The referrals may not have been as originally intended, and the students who came to the lab may not have been the ones for whom it was originally intended, but they came all the same. They came on their own, and

they came because they were sent—sent by English composition instructors, sent by instructors in other disciplines (eventually almost all), sent by advisors, sent by friends, sent by themselves.

As the departmental chairman wrote in response to the first prose narrative, "thanks for your report, which does suggest that the lab is of real value, though faculty have not used it for its original purpose. Clearly such service is desirable and useful, and people are taking advantage of it." Oh yes, people have taken advantage of the lab, and I have had plenty to do in spite of the fact that in the ten academic years the lab has existed, only once (well, twice, no thrice) has it been used as originally intended. The first time doesn't really count, and the third time is proof the story is still being written.

The second, main time (and until recently what I really considered the only time) occurred about four years into the lab's existence. A student ignored a college requirement and took his composition courses off-campus the summer before his final year. The particulars of his shenanigans about the courses are not important; what is important is that having successfully completed the composition requirement for graduation, the student still could not write, and the fall semester after his successful summer in composition, three professors in disparate disciplines required his presence in the Writing Lab. Throughout the spring semester I worked with him, and by midterm, we had established a ritual. After completing his work for the day, he would look at me and almost whisper, "Mrs. Davis, you know that essay I've got to write . . .uh . . . what if I can't?" I, unlike Norman Vincent Peale, not a believer in the power of positive thinking but a strong believer in the power of negative thinking, would never let him finish his question but would always reply, "Mr. Smith, that's not very positive thinking; if the time comes for us to cross that body of troubled

water, we'll build the bridge." From the coast, he appreciated the twist in the cliché and the musical taste—or pretended to. The truth was that I, too, was afraid to face the very real possibility that this student would not/could not develop the writing skills that would permit him to graduate. What would that say about me, about the lab? Should he not graduate, would the lab's existence be challenged? Would the problem be Chowan's or the university where the composition courses were taken?

In the end he did graduate, and a week or so later, as part of his response to the annual writing lab report, the college dean included this note: "I don't think that I have told you how glad I am that [Mr. Smith] made it. I realize that it was the English faculty that scored the exit essay and made the decision, but you are the person that worked with the student and got him ready. As you know, the situation involving this student was quite 'touchy,' and I was a bit concerned about how I would deal with him and his mother had he not been successful." I had not been the only one concerned. No, I hadn't known the situation was quite "touchy," and I hadn't known I was not the only one concerned.

One referral caused the student to leave us; another referral allowed the student to leave us able "to demonstrate expository writing with correct grammar, punctuation, and logical organization." At least I think he was; I hope he was. Just as I practiced denial with him about the possibility of his not passing, so I practiced denial about him at the graduation ceremony when I saw the message on his mortar board: MOM, I DONE IT! Embellishments to academic regalia are not pretty.

Just as children sometimes shape themselves into the people they wish to be rather than the people their parents expected/expect them to be, the lab has shaped itself into what it wishes to be,

what the people who use it, whether referring or referred, wish it to be. It has grown from nothing; it was nurtured as anything; it has matured to something. No longer in the dimly-lighted, ill-equipped broom closet that masqueraded as an office, it has its own home in “a clean, well-lighted place.” The dictionary and *Harbrace Handbook* (obviously a later edition) are still there (well sort of, the *Harbrace* walked away last semester, and apparently hasn’t the strength to walk back or has become too confused to do so), but they are supplemented by twelve fully loaded PC’s. The one instructor is still there, but I am complemented by three student assistants. The hours have more than doubled, but they still do not always mesh with the students’ schedules. Continuing to define itself by its use, yet another dimension has been added: Rather than take a non-credit remedial course prior to beginning freshman English, students not prepared for English 101 now take En-

glish 101 with Writing Lab, augmenting the three-hour course with two lab hours per week.

The generic writing lab is now THE WRITE PLACE. To understand how it came to be the right place, one needs to know its story which is known by knowing its stories—and those stories continue. When I began considering the history of the Chowan Writing Lab, I could recall only one story about use of the writing lab as originally intended, but just last semester, I received a call from a chemistry professor: “I have a junior who can not write a lab report; we cannot think about letting her graduate without the necessary skills.” That story is just beginning.

The lab is more than a physical place; it’s wherever the instructor is found—in another building on campus, in a business downtown, at the end of a phone line, in response to an e-mail. It’s when and where writing instruction

is needed, whether by students, faculty, or staff (who have also used the lab, but that’s another story of the story).

“I love to tell the story.”

And I could keep telling the story because a writing lab fits the definition of the uniquely American icons—jazz, *Huck Finn*, and the Empire State Building. Once the basic melody or story is established, the musician, raconteur, or builder can add note, anecdote, and story on and on. The story of how The Write Place came to be something from nothing is the compilation of many stories of battles fought and lost, of battles fought and won, of successes, and of failures. It is a great story, sometimes tragic, sometimes comic, but always great. It is an important story. It is a story to be shared.

*Sarah Davis
Chowan College
Murfreesboro, NC*

THE WRITING LAB
N E W S L E T T E R

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

Address Service Requested

Non-profit Organization U.S. Postage PAID Purdue University
--