

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 26, Number 3

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

November, 2001

...FROM THE EDITOR...

In this month's newsletter you'll notice some announcements for writing center jobs. If you're wondering why so much space is given over to this (in this issue and in previous ones), it's because these announcements should be of interest not only to those seeking new positions but also to the rest of us in administrative positions now or thinking about taking on such jobs in the future.

We talk at conferences, on WCenter, and in essays about institutional positioning of writing centers and where they are situated; we talk about the kinds of responsibilities our jobs ask us to take on, the training and experience needed, the question of whether or not positions are tenure track appointments, and so on. If you have a few spare moments (HA . . . sorry, I know that at the busiest time of the year, that's likely to cause you to mutter, "don't I wish"), read those job announcements on pages 9 and 13 (and in previous issues) to see the variety of answers that exist to our questions about professional status and training.

And the different topics discussed in the rest of this newsletter will also remind us how broadly we need to think about the variety of issues we confront every day.

• Muriel Harris, editor

...INSIDE...

From the Margins to the (Writing) Center: Collaborative Efforts in Writing Center and Composition Program Activities

• Dominic Delli Carpini
and Cynthia Crimmins 1

Review of Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences
by Donald McAndrew
and Thomas J. Reigstad

• Cornelius Cosgrove 6

Tutors' Columns:

"Keep Chopping"

• Dot Stacy 10

"It Happens to Everyone: The Nightmare in the First Year"

• Lauren Finan 11

Conference Calendar 13

ESL Theory and Practice: Is It Portable?

• Marylou Gramm 14

From the margins to the (writing) center: Collaborative efforts in writing center and composition program activities

The geography of our writing program is a complex, but not atypical, one. On one side of campus, housed in the English department, are the Composition program and its Director of Composition. Across campus, in its newly refurbished—but still remote—location are our writing consultants, administered by the Director of the Learning Resource Center. And in classrooms all across campus composition faculty—as well as faculty in various disciplines, full and part-time—deliver writing instruction in its most visible form. If we view this potentially divided house from the perspective of a student ("Mr. J. said what was important was avoiding comma splices, but Ms. M. loves metaphors and Mr. K. wants clarity and brevity"), we might better understand why collaboration is necessary.

But we have begun to imagine somewhat more promising circumstances.

What, from one perspective, looked like a divided house has now begun to look like numerous outposts all over campus, staffed by people with similar goals and complementary techniques. From this new perspective, we have come to accept two basic premises, captured well by Mark Waldo: 1) that “writing programs and centers should share an equal and complementary relationship” and 2) that “the composition classroom is not . . . a place where one focus of activity occurs, the writing center another” (73-4). While ac-

knowledging that writing center consultants and classroom writing teachers have related goals as they work with the same students, we also remain quite aware that our roles in writing instruction must remain distinct. As Jeanne Simpson has noted, “It seems to me that writing centers exist because there was no place in the institution to do what centers attempt” (152). Dave Healy, too, reminds us of the unique space provided by a writing center, asserting that “the relationship between the writing center and the classroom is complex.” As characterized by Healy,

Unless the writing center provides an alternative to the classroom, unless writers experience something there that is qualitatively different from what they find elsewhere on their journey through the curriculum, then justifying the center’s existence (and budget) seems problematic. (189)

Towards these ends, while working towards developing open communication lines and an understanding of the expectations and methods of the others involved in delivering writing instruction, we’ve been careful to retain the productive distinctions in the work we each do and the importance of dialogue rather than centralization of the program.

In this essay, we will suggest that a “Writing Program” or “Writing across the Curriculum” (WAC) may be thought of as comprised of a series of symbiotic parts rather than as a centralized program. We posit this for two reasons. First, we share Richard Leahy’s sense that “WAC programs can become one-sided, losing sight of the purpose of writing across the curriculum as a whole” (and its corollary: “when a WAC program drifts off the mark, the writing center can drift with it”) (31). Second, we believe that as an alternative to a centralized WAC program, there is much to be gained when compositionists, writing center consultants, and instructors who use writ-

ing in various disciplines work from mutual respect—a respect that is crucial to doing the work of each.

Though we do not have—nor do we advocate—a formal WAC “Program,” we do acknowledge that our collaborative vision has much to learn from the now quarter-century old WAC movement which has argued for “writing to learn” in all disciplines. As WAC advocates such as Edward White, Art Young, and Toby Fulwiler have articulated, WAC has always gone against the grain of American educational methods. White has shown us how WAC remains in opposition to dominant modes of learning in American education, which rely too much upon detached memorization of material; and Fulwiler and Young have continually insisted that for WAC to succeed, it must influence the entire college community’s attitude towards learning.

In practice, WAC has had mixed results; but its initial *raison d’être*, as a response to the democratization of higher education, remains more crucial than ever. As Peter Carino suggests, writing centers (or what he calls “writing clinics”) share some of these socially responsible impulses of “serving the disenfranchised” (39). Thus, since WAC originated from the conviction that writing is crucial to the processes of learning in all disciplines, and since it responds to the needs of an academy available to a wider diversity of students, its spirit remains vital to the work of all of us who teach writing. And, for a number of reasons the writing center could be in the forefront of a renewed effort to bring writing to the “center” of general education (see Wallace 191).

If WAC is a “movement” with a history and mission from which we can learn much about the role of writing centers, what are its aims and its assumptions? WAC begins from the assumption that writing is not a generic skill, nor is “good writing” something whose assessment can be divorced

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 International 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).

from content and situation. That is, writing is always “writing about” and “writing to.” But first-year composition (FYC) can, conversely, be isolated from the rest of the writing community since it is often divorced from the specific purposes and situations that make writing a valued skill. This happens not only because FYC is taught from a department that, in most cases, does not represent the student’s major field. It happens also because students experience FYC before they begin their involvement in the discourses of their major fields, causing the course to appear—however erroneously—as empty stylistics. Whether or not this perception is wholly accurate (and we honestly don’t believe it is), the perception itself is still revealing. Students who have been trained in disciplinary boundaries have also mentally divorced style from content, something we (and WAC) would argue is antithetical to developing thoughtful writing and students’ motivation to write. Conversely, a WAC program that designates specific “writing intensive courses” sometimes only acts to further segment those who *do* from those who *don’t* (value writing as a learning tool, that is).

The alternative model—that English classes (supported by writing center “tutors”) provide the well-wrought urn of style, the proper and universal rules for good writing, followed by discipline-specific courses that provide students with that content that fills this mold of proper expression—has also not been wholly successful. Such a perspective on writing instruction suggests that writing is a generic skill that is easily and readily used in any discourse community—and, as students find, it is not. But if from start to finish, each participant in the general education of our students is actively involved in and supports the efforts of their colleagues, the potential is there to bring about the spirit of WAC (to treat writing as a natural learning tool) without some of its burdensome administrative problems.

Yet even in our small college setting, fostering and maintaining a collaborative, communicative atmosphere is never an easy matter. The frenetic schedule of all participants in the delivery of writing instruction makes regular communication difficult. To further complicate matters, even though WAC is not institutionalized as a program, the delivery of writing instruction has its traditional institutional hierarchies: composition is taught by both full-time and adjunct faculty; our writing center is staffed by professional tutors, some of whom also teach in the classroom here and elsewhere (and, of course, many writing centers use peer tutors as well—at a whole other level of hierarchy); the Writing Center and its Director are housed outside the budgetary and administrative auspices of the English Department; and the Director of Composition is a member of the English Department, with responsibilities in both writing and literature. Further, “writing” (defined and treated variously as a mode of learning, a form of expression, or a technical mode of communicating in one’s discipline) happens in classrooms all over campus. Instructors in our Composition program see virtually all of York College students, while writing center consultants work with students in all disciplines. Administratively, the Writing Center Director reports directly to the Dean of Academic Affairs. The Director of Composition works within a Composition Program comprised of English Department faculty and adjunct Composition faculty. And the entire faculty is responsible to uphold the college-wide “Communications Standards” statement that insists that writing and speech are crucial aspects of the education students receive here. In short, though the configurations might be slightly different on other campuses, we are a typical college in most ways.

We’ve begun to realize that such a diverse configuration of personnel and administrative avenues might be our greatest strength, since in our small

college setting, we already interact with so many facets of the college and on so many levels. Though such a wide array of venues for writing instruction and its administration could splinter college-wide goals in this area, through collaborative efforts, our writing “center” has the potential to become a crucial nexus for ideas about writing. But such collaboration, as Muriel Harris has noted, must first overcome the “gulf between writing centers and teachers of writing” (30). Here at York College of Pennsylvania, the Writing Center Director and Director of Composition have begun to bridge that gulf by facilitating semester-long communication between the two groups they represent. Once this interaction was set in motion, some of the boundary lines identified by Harris have been breached: the discussions have fostered a mutual respect between the administrators and lead to a greater sense of professionalism; the writing center has thrown off its duties as a “remedial only” institution; and the rigid wall between classroom and writing center has instead become a door from one to the other (see Harris 34-35).

Communication has been the key to our early successes. Fortunately, our Writing Center budget allows for funding of a catered luncheon meeting each semester for the Writing Center staff, Composition instructors, and instructors of other writing intensive courses (and one should not neglect the role of providing a congenial setting and some of the niceties of a luncheon to show our appreciation for work done). The gathering serves as a forum for a collaborative discussion among the various contributors to a wider, though less formalized, conception of “writing across the curriculum.” Although the meetings begin with formal agendas prepared by the Writing Center Director and the Director of Composition, the conversations have invariably taken on a life of their own as we all begin talking about writing.

Some of the ideas born at the meetings have become staples of our Writing Center and Composition Program *modus op-*

erandi. Now, when Writing Center Consultants send detailed memos of their sessions with students to faculty after each writing center conference, those notes are being written to someone whose face, and ideas about writing, they know. And though faculty members have always been encouraged to write back to the consultants, the regularity of this practice has increased since actual relationships have been established. Add to these actual relationships the possibilities for virtual discussions available through the technology of e-mail and listservs, and the potential exists for us to go well beyond notes about the needs of individual students. Instead, the discussion takes on the character of professionals speaking to one another within their discipline.

To further foster such dialogue, the Director of Composition has encouraged Writing Center “Consultants” (itself a new nomenclature we designed to reflect their escape from remedial tutoring) to see their work as equally valuable to the instruction delivered in the classroom. That is, the writing center consultant’s job is not to join in the student game of “figuring out the professor,” but to rely upon their own expertise in writing instruction as they discuss student writing with their colleagues across campus. Though the words of Stephen North (“misunderstanding is something one expects—and almost gets used to—in the writing center business”) still ring in our ears, we have at least made the “getting used to it” part less of an expected norm (71).

Perhaps the ideas that have yielded the most positive steps towards throwing off what Harris has called the “bottom of the totem pole” tradition (31-2) were those that asked both classroom instructors and writing center consultants to move beyond their usual geographic boundaries, creating both a physical—and a social—mobility. Many writing instructors, rather than

merely *telling* their students about the writing center, have begun to journey with their classes into the writing center for a quick orientation early in the semester. These visits take only about 10-15 minutes, usually borrowed from the end of a class session. But this trek gives the students the opportunity to see the physical location of the Writing Center (off the beaten path, as is often the case), meet staff members, and understand better how a session is conducted. When this is not possible, writing consultants offer instead to go into instructors’ classrooms to present a quick preview of the Writing Center’s services. Lately, some of the more playful instructors and consultants have been improvising humorous skits of sessions, demonstrating how undesirable it can be for students to wait until the day before a paper is due to talk with a writing consultant. The students have truly enjoyed the skits and appear to be much more comfortable with both the instructors and the consultants afterward.

Several of the faculty members have benefited so much from this collaboration that they have invited the consultants back later in the semester to assist with peer review sessions. Having an extra instructor on hand helps the peer review process run more efficiently and demonstrates to the students the level of confidence that faculty members have in the consultants’ teaching abilities. There are even instances when the consultants and instructors exchange roles and substitute for one another in the classroom or writing center, giving each a wider view of the “writing across the curriculum” that is already occurring.

When the Writing Center Director and Director of Composition consciously facilitate such collaborative efforts, we have found that writing consultants become more widely valued members of the college community. At our college, it now occurs to the faculty to invite the Writing Center

Director (who is an administrator, not a member of the faculty) and the consultants to relevant faculty meetings and development retreats. The consultants and the Director are now given scheduled time on meeting agendas to present their policy manual to faculty from all disciplines and explain the procedures they use to teach writing skills. The result is faculty members who respect the consultants’ role in teaching writing in various disciplines, which is important since 55% of the papers we see in the center are from courses other than composition. Faculty members in all disciplines are now more likely to refer their students to the writing center and communicate regularly with the staff about the best way to teach writing skills.

Of course, the marriage (or at least engagement) of WAC and writing centers is already a topic of national discussion. Kathy Evertz, among others, has begun to ask questions like “can the writing center be a liberatory center when it’s also a WAC center?” She concludes that this liberation can take place only when “writing center tutors become ‘critical co-investigators’ with WAC faculty into the theory and practices of different discourse communities” and that “it’s through multiple conversations, between us and WAC faculty and students, that agency might be achieved” (2). While this is clearly the case, and “agency” is at least the intermediate goal towards achieving an effective, unified writing program, the critical absentee in such a structure might—oddly enough—have been the freshman composition program.

FYC, which Sharon Crowley has pejoratively dubbed “the universal requirement”—and perhaps not without some reasons for her skepticism—still holds the perceived lion’s share of the duty of delivering writing instruction, and in most cases, the largest staff and most funding. Only in comparison to writing centers can composition programs feel higher on the food chain, it

seems. But working in isolation, composition programs miss an important chance to bring down departmental boundaries and connect with campus-wide efforts to foster writing-based curricula. For this reason, it may very well be up to the administrators of composition programs and writing centers, especially at small colleges, to recognize the value in such collaboration. The confederation of those who have always felt a certain disconnectedness from the mainstream of higher education may now find that from the various corners of campus, a similar message is being sent. If we can find a way to respect the varied methods by which this message is being communicated, writing across the curriculum might be a result rather than a program.

*Dominic Delli Carpini and
Cynthia Crimmins
York College
York, PA*

Works Cited

- Carino, Peter. "What Do We Talk about When We Talk About Our Metaphors: A Cultural Critique of Clinic, Lab, and Center." Murphy and Law 37-46.
- Evertz, Kathy. "Can the Writing Center Be a Liberatory Center When It's also a WAC Center?" *Writing Lab Newsletter* 23.5 (1999): 1-4.
- Fulwiler, Toby, and Art Young. "The Enemies of Writing Across the Curriculum." *Programs That Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1990. 287-94.
- Harris, Muriel. "What's Up and What's In: Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers." Murphy and Law 27-36.
- Healy, Dave. "A Defense of Dualism: The Writing Center and the Classroom." Murphy and Law 179-90.
- Leahy, Richard. "Writing Centers and Writing-For-Learning." *Writing Center Journal* 10.1 (1983): 31-37.
- Murphy, Christina, and Joe Law. *Landmark Essays on Writing Centers*. Davis: Hemagoras P, 1995.
- North, Stephen. "The Idea of a Writing Center." Murphy and Law 71-86.
- Simpson, Jeanne. "What Lies Ahead for Writing Centers: Position Statement of Professional Concerns." Murphy and Law 57-62.
- Waldo, Mark L. "What Should the Relation Between the Writing Center and the Writing Program Be?" *Writing Center Journal* 11.1 (1990): 73-80.
- Wallace, Ray. "The Writing Center's Role in the Writing Across the Curriculum Program: Theory and Practice." Murphy and Law 191.
- White, Edward. "The Damage of Innovations Set Adrift." *AAHE Bulletin* 44 (Nov. 1990): 3-5.

East Central Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals

April 4-6, 2002

Canton, Ohio

"The Expanding Center: Big (and Little) Bangs in Writing Center Theory and Practice"

Proposal abstracts (250 words) for 20-minute presentations, or 90-minute panels or workshops to be e-mailed/faxed/postmarked by February 1, 2002 to: Jay D. Sloan, Kent State University-Stark Campus, 6000 Frank Ave. N.W., Canton, OH 44720-7599. E-mail: jsloan@stark.kent.edu; phone: 330-244-3458; fax: 330-494-1621.

Northeast Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals

April 19-20, 2002

Smithfield, Rhode Island

"Writing Centers and Diversity"

Keynote speaker: Nancy Grimm

For more information, see our Conference Web Site at <http://web.bryant.edu/~ace/WrtCtr/NEWCA.htm>. Questions may be directed to J.P. Nadeau (jnadeau@bryant.edu) or Sue Dinitz (sdinitz@zoo.uvm.edu). Proposals due: December 21, 2001.

Book Review

McAndrew, Donald A., and Thomas J. Reigstad. *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 2001. 156 pages.

Reviewed by Cornelius Cosgrove (Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, PA)

Expanding the universe of writing tutors

Seventeen years after the publication of their successful little monograph *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences* McAndrew and Reigstad have chosen to move beyond academic classrooms and writing centers, and to boldly explore the possibilities of conferencing through electronic media and in such locales as homes and workplaces.

Containing practical procedural guidelines, useful advice on composing, and even ready-to-use record-keeping forms for working tutors, their latest book can hardly be accused of abandoning traditional locales for conferencing, and should prove a valuable tool for writing teachers as well as trained and peer tutors. Nevertheless, *Tutoring Writing* could be most notable for its effort to greatly expand the universe for writing conferences. McAndrew and Reigstad may fail to neatly match their tutoring paradigm, a paradigm grounded mostly in the experience of conferencing first-year college and adolescent writers, with all the possible challenges posed by cross-curricular and workplace writing tasks. At the same time, the authors do succeed in defining parameters for tutoring research in the above areas that could occupy scholars interested in such conferencing for years to come.

McAndrew and Reigstad established impressive credentials among writing center directors, tutors, and composition teachers in 1984 with their 43-page handbook on training tutors, an effort that garnered the following year's best publication award from the National Writing Centers Association. As a university writing center director

for six years, and an instructor of undergraduate pre-service teachers for more than a decade, this reviewer can personally attest to their modest monograph's utility and accessibility, having used it in a practicum course in the teaching of writing and as a text for training new graduate student tutors. McAndrew and Reigstad's current publication, while obviously updating its review of writing conference research, retains some valuable features from their original effort: basic conferencing strategies, common tutoring situations, and those familiar but still helpful distinctions between "higher-order" and "lower-order" concerns for drafting and revision.

Another virtue brought forward from the earlier publication is a clear, readable style that is absolutely essential if *Tutoring Writing* is to be accessible to both peer and workplace tutors as well as graduate students. This accessibility includes their material on the theory and research that forms and supports current conferencing practices, including summations of social constructionist and reader-response theories, theories connecting talk with writing, collaborative learning theories, and theory that has emerged from feminist studies. The following passage on reader-response theories, for example, models a clarity of expression that teachers of literary criticism on the undergraduate level might well emulate:

Subjective criticism, the more radical of the two theories, gives prominence to the reader over the text, arguing that the text is merely a culturally agreed upon pattern of ink symbols on paper.

The real meaning . . . is in the reader's response to those symbols. Meaning is, therefore, made by the reader, not by the text; reading is the act of interpretation based on the reader's previous experiences, not just the act of finding or collecting from the text. (3)

Tutoring Writing is also tightly edited, consisting of an introduction and eleven brief chapters that do not hesitate to explain but, given the book's broad ambitions and potential audiences, commonly choose not to elaborate or complicate. The Introduction describes the book's purposes ("talking about tutoring writing in new ways, introducing new theoretical and research support, new understandings of the processes of tutoring, and new discussions of the people and places where tutoring occurs"), and the writers' histories as writing conference scholars. Important to those histories is their consulting experience, particularly Reigstad's with various businesses and school districts, and McAndrew's with PTAs and parent groups. The first two chapters review the aforementioned theory and research; the next two seek to define writing tutorials by describing their processes and denying any alleged similarities to professional editing, teaching, or psychotherapy. Chapters Five and Six explore different tutorial situations, models, and strategies. While Chapters Four and Five draw the most from McAndrew's and Reigstad's earlier monograph, it is Chapters Seven ("Tutoring in Different Places"), Eight ("Tutoring Different People") and Ten ("Tutoring and Technology") that seek to break the most new ground. The last chapter is a de-

scription of a tutor training course, supplemented by numerous forms for tutors to track, evaluate, and record conferences.

Chapter Nine, "Lessons from the Masters," deserves special mention, as it draws from interviews Reigstad conducted more than 20 years ago with three early pioneers of a one-to-one approach to developing student writers—Donald Murray, Roger Garrison, and Walker Gibson. Added to the mix are summations of the tutoring approaches of Donald Graves, Muriel Harris, Nancie Atwell, Peter Elbow, and Thomas Newkirk. For this reviewer, the primary value of the chapter lies in its obvious message that the contingencies created by a variety of writer and tutor personalities, conferencing situations, and stages of writing development demand creativity and flexibility on the part of anyone who seeks to tutor writing, while rendering problematic any narrowly orthodox approach to writing conferences.

The richness of McAndrew's and Reigstad's book does not obscure certain flaws in its makeup, flaws attributable in part to the current state of scholarship in the field of tutoring and in part to the book's ambitious scope in terms of purposes and audiences. (Those audiences encompass not just writing teachers and academic teachers, but also parents and workplace writers.) Its role as handbook and guide for tutors with varying degrees of expertise and training appears to create occasional inconsistencies in its descriptions of tutoring's theoretical and research support. There is seemingly not enough space available to tie up some loose ends, nor enough confidence in the book's broad audience to allow acknowledgement of possible contradictions in theories and findings.

For example, feminist theories of women's psychological, moral, and cognitive development promulgated by

Carol Gilligan and Mary Belenky et al. are presented without recognition of the considerable controversy these theories have generated within their own disciplinary fields. An interesting discussion of how chaos, complexity, and fuzzy logic theories might explain the variety, unpredictability, and need for adaptability inherent in tutoring fails also to consider that the same theories could call into question some of the empirical support for tutoring's effectiveness cited earlier in the book. And when Linda Flower and John Hayes are mentioned within a discussion of writers' cognitive processes, this reviewer wonders what happened to the social constructivists whose theories not only support current writing conference practices but also vigorously object to a strictly cognitivist model of composing.

The material found in the middle chapters has a variety and practicality, from the point-of-view of a former writing center director and constant teacher of first-year composition, for which all readers will likely feel grateful. (Sections at the end of Chapter Six on helping students identify and eliminate various "lower order" problems, and on training tutors to respond usefully to whole pieces of writing, may alone be worth the price of this book.) Given such value, this reviewer is somewhat reluctant to point out that the authors' considerable knowledge seems tightly linked to the familiar milieu of first-year composition and writing center work, and consequently most applicable to creative or expressive writing, rather than the writing likely to be found in other academic disciplines, not to mention professional writing situations. This issue does take on some importance once we reach the chapter on "Tutoring in Different Places," in which writing situations within disciplines, in workplace settings, and as part of home schooling and homework are addressed. More needs to be done to demonstrate how a

tutoring paradigm formed primarily through work in secondary and undergraduate English classrooms, as well as writing centers usually directed by English compositionists and manned by English majors, can be applied to writing that is *not* humanistic in nature.

The authors do forthrightly tackle the question of whether tutors who possess specific disciplinary knowledge should be assigned to student writers writing in those disciplines. They cite a study by Kiedaisch and Dinitz (1993) that appears to support matching tutors to writers in such a way. But McAndrew and Reigstad are reluctant to let go of their loyalty to all-purpose tutors whose very ignorance of disciplinary subject matter can force texts into a state of greater specificity and clarity. Unfortunately, this argument ignores the possibility that the conventions of particular disciplines and professions may find such specificity unnecessary in many instances, and that some readers' clarity may be another readers' over-simplification of the subject matter.

In the end, issues regarding tutors' disciplinary or professional expertise, and the suitability of some strategies in writing situations beyond English composition assignments, remain unresolved. In fairness, despite McAndrew's and Reigstad's established erudition concerning writing conferences, it shouldn't be expected that their current efforts could resolve such issues. Yet another value of this book is its exposition of gaps in the scholarship of writing conferences that a maturing field of inquiry needs to address. The authors' bold foray into tutoring's expanding possibilities is also an invitation to both current and future scholars to explore just which models and strategies will prove effective in disciplinary and workplace writing, and which combinations of expertise and naivete among tutors and writers

might generate the most productive conferences.

Given the obvious thoroughness of their approach to the literature of tutoring, a thoroughness evident throughout this book, McAndrew and Reigstad's chapter on supporting research suggests still more areas ripe for new scholarship. There are a few exceptions, but the bulk of the research they cite regarding peer response groups is more than ten years old. A similar pattern emerges in the review of studies on one-to-one conferencing, and while the investigations into tutoring writing itself appear more recent, most seem to be focusing on the early grades. Interest in particular areas of composition studies often seems cyclical in nature, due perhaps to both the broad scope of our discipline and the difficulties facing time-pressed practitioners seeking to research their practice. Let us hope that the wide net cast by *Tutoring Writing* will encourage inquiry from a variety of sources, within and beyond com-

position studies, since the notion of writing conferences applied to sites, writers, and situations throughout our culture seems so promising.

"I know my conferences today are less ritualized and formulaic than when I began teaching writing in a workshop because my knowledge base has broadened and deepened," Nancie Atwell observes in *In the Middle* (Cited by McAndrew and Reigstad 116). *Tutoring Writing* will broaden and deepen the knowledge of any reader who picks it up. Wendy Bishop, in the foreword, refers to this most recent effort by McAndrew and Reigstad as "the 'little book' that grew" (vii). If readers accept the challenge implicit in their work, then maybe we can look forward, in another 15 years or so, to yet another accessible, information-packed guide to writing conferences—perhaps of even greater length next time, to accommodate still newer venues for the activity and more recent research into its efficacy.

Works Cited

- Belenky, Mary Field, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.
- Flower, Linda, and John R. Hayes. "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 35 (1981): 365-87.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982.
- Kiedaisch, Jean, and Sue Dinitz. "Look Back and Say 'So What': The Limitations of the Generalist Tutor." *Writing Center Journal* 14 (1993): 63-74.
- Reigstad, Thomas J., and Donald A. McAndrew. *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences*. Urbana: NCTE, 1984.

Kevin Davis Wins 2001 Maxwell Award

"Congratulations to Kevin Davis, Director of the Writing Center at East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma, for winning the 2001 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing "Ron Maxwell Award for Distinguished Leadership in Promoting the Collaborative Learning Practices of Peer Tutors in Writing." The award recognizes an individual for dedication to and leadership in collaborative learning in writing centers, for aiding students in together taking on more responsibility for their learning, and, thus, for promoting the work of peer tutors. Its presentation also denotes extraordinary service to the evolution of the NCPTW.

"Kevin has made a long, vital commitment to the NCPTW and its steering committee, and especially to the tutors who give the organization its reason for being. . . .

Kevin's professional focus is another of his valuable contributions: Kevin has been instrumental in keeping the conference focused on the tutors . . . as presenters and organizers; he always urges us to think clearly about the contributions peer tutors make and about what we directors need to do to create and maintain good programs; he's been a great model for bringing peer tutors who are empowered to the conference. . . . A longtime associate recalls one of Kevin's defining characteristics: 'When I think of Kevin, I think of the liveliness, animation, and bounce with which he carries himself into his work. He's having fun.'"

Jon Olson
NCPTW Maxwell Award Administrator
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA

Writing Center Director Texas A&M University

We seek a senior specialist in Rhetoric and Composition to direct the newly-established Undergraduate Writing Center and support writing-in-the-disciplines courses. The Director will hold tenure as a faculty member in the Department of English. Duties will include budgeting, training and supervision of support staff, working to support writing-intensive course tutoring, maintaining an on-line writing center, and working with a campus-wide Advisory Board. Further, the Director may expect to raise funds, to open satellite centers, to host writing-in-the-disciplines-workshops, to invite and support research in writing, and to represent the Center to the university and to the public.

Qualifications: The applicant should be tenurable in the Department of English at Texas A&M University with the rank

of Associate Professor or Professor. We seek a scholar with credentials in Rhetoric and Composition, or related fields, a distinguished record of publication, teaching, and service at the national level, and expertise in the administration of a writing center, writing program, or writing-in-the-disciplines program. Experience in technical/scientific writing, computers and writing, English as a Second Language, or literacy studies would further strengthen candidates' qualifications. The Writing Center Director should demonstrate superior communication skills, flexibility, and vision regarding the teaching of literacy in the university.

We will begin reviewing applications after November 15, and will be interviewing at the MLA. The search

will remain open until a suitable candidate is found. Candidates should be prepared to assume the duties by 15 August, 2002.

Procedure: Applicants should submit a letter of application describing their academic and administrative background; a statement of their vision of an undergraduate university writing center; a curriculum vitae; and the names of three references to: Dr. Richard L. Carlson, Department of Geology and Geophysics, and Dr. C. Jan Swearingen, Department of English, Co-Chairs, Office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Programs and Academic Services, Texas A&M University, 203 Jack K. Williams Administration Building, 1125 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-1125.

Writing Center Director U. of Tennessee at Chattanooga

The Dept. of English invites applications for the position of tenure-track assistant professor of English and director of the university writing center beginning August 2002. Duties involve supervising all operations of the writing center—including recruiting, hiring, training, supervising, and evaluating a staff of students who provide tutorial support for their peers—and teaching a 2/2 load of courses in rhetoric and composition, with some graduate teaching possible.

Qualifications: Ph.D. in composition and rhetoric preferred (ABD considered); demonstrated excellence in and commitment to undergraduate teaching; excellent writing, interpersonal, and communication skills; successful experience at the university level in tutoring or working in a writing center; thorough knowledge of computers and proficiency in major software programs. Position carries a 10-month appointment.

The search committee will begin screening applications on 15 November 2001 and will continue until the position is filled. Please submit a letter of interest, vita, and three letters of references to Margaret Jackson, Chair of the Search Committee, Department of English (2703), University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 615 McCallie Avenue, Chattanooga, TN 37403.

Writing Center Director SUNY at Stony Brook, NY

Duties include teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in Rhetoric and Composition, taking part in ongoing curriculum development, shaping the future of the Writing Center and a Writing Across the Curriculum Program. Evidence of scholarly activity expected.

Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition or related field, with a specialization in composition and rhetoric, and writing program administrative experience is required. Experience in developing programs, in using computer-aided instruction, and in writing center theory and practice preferred. This is a tenure track position. Pending budgetary approval. Salary commensurate with experience.

Applications must be received by November 12, 2001. Send cover letter, curriculum vitae, three letters of reference, transcript of graduate course work, and writing sample to Chair of the Search Committee, Program in Writing and Rhetoric, 197 Humanities Building, SUNY at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, New York 11794-5340.

TUTORS' COLUMN

Keep chopping

When I took Ben Franklin's advice, "Little strokes fell big oaks," I became a better writer and tutor. While working with students in the writing center I realized the importance of that advice. At first I found it difficult to focus on a few things, as opposed to fixing the whole paper. Eventually I realized students accomplished more when we broke things down into smaller parts. By helping other students, I learned that my writing became easier when I followed that advice. Trying to cut down that oak tree with just one swoop can overwhelm any writer.

Jane, one of the first students I tutored, came to the writing center on the recommendation of her English instructor for a rewrite of an unacceptable paper. Her paper had no introduction, thesis, or conclusion with every sentence constructed as a fragment or a run-on. Jane's writing had no organization or paragraphs. The comments her professor wrote dealt mainly with spelling and punctuation. Jane obviously needed to deal with bigger problems. Before she was going to cut down that oak tree, she needed to take many little strokes.

In her first tutoring session we talked about how to write a sentence by reviewing a section in *The Little Brown Handbook*. After talking about subjects and verbs, we discussed a few examples in the book. I suggested she rewrite a few of her fragments in the first paragraph of her paper to help her understand the elements that compose a sentence. Understanding what makes a complete thought seemed like such a small accomplishment. Since we covered only one small problem in her writing, she agreed to another appointment.

At Jane's second appointment we talked about the importance of developing the introduction to keep the reader's interest, and why she needed to tell the reader what her paper was about. Jane developed a clearer idea of what she wanted her essay to say. Finally, she wrote a clear thesis statement that she included in her introduction. I saw her enthusiasm for writing increase as she felt she understood those basic concepts. Writing started to make sense to her. After two appointments we hadn't moved past her first paragraph. We set a follow-up appointment, and talked about setting a regular time for her to see a writing fellow every week. The value of Ben Franklin's words became clearer to me. Just looking at that original essay overwhelmed both of us. Breaking down Jane's problems into little pieces gave her the courage and the desire to continue. She kept chopping at that oak tree, little by little.

John also reminded me to stay focused and not to concentrate on too many things at once. John, a returning adult student, felt uncomfortable seeing a younger writing fellow for his appointment. As we talked about the process of going back to school as an older adult, I discovered he was enrolled in a remedial English class. John had a challenge. He needed to write a six-page research paper for his geography class even though he had never written a research paper before. He showed me information gathered from personal interviews and maps about the building of the Bedford Academy, a new charter school. He conquered the first step in writing a research paper by choosing a topic that interested him. His excitement for the project showed

when he talked about the information, but he wasn't sure how to relate it to geography.

During the first session we discussed a thesis. The longer he talked the more I could see he had an idea in his mind, but he talked in circles. He planned to write about the project as a whole picture. With my suggestion he narrowed his topic, making it easier to write a thesis. Finally, he decided how this building related to geography. At the end of the first tutoring session John had one sentence down on paper. Before I started tutoring I doubt I would have considered that an accomplishment. John and I met three times before he completed a rough draft of his paper. He took little steps before he could take the big one of putting the paper together.

My most challenging tutoring session became my most rewarding one by helping a student see he could take small strokes to edit his paper when he thought it was perfect. Mike wasn't happy when his professor required him to see a writing fellow. He let me know by throwing his paper in front of me and stating, "I want you to know that I don't like being here. I resent being told that I have to see you. I don't need to be here. I had an English teacher who taught me everything I need to know about writing research papers."

His attitude jarred me a bit at first, but I told him I appreciated his honesty. As he read through his paper he found a place that he had inserted the same word twice. When I asked him if he read his papers aloud, he gave me the strangest look. The value of this strategy became apparent as he found

several more mistakes. I showed him how to read his paper backwards, sentence by sentence. I could see the light bulb flash when he admitted no one had ever suggested that strategy to him. Now he listened intently when we talked about developing his conclusion. When he came for his second required appointment, he gladly listened to my comments. He thanked me for helping him with the little things in his paper. When he filled out the evaluation sheet, he made the comment that he may consider coming to a writing

fellow when a professor doesn't require it. Considering where we began, that was a giant step.

Those little strokes that Ben Franklin talks about can sometimes move the process of writing a paper along faster than tackling everything as a whole. Working on small pieces makes the task seem less formidable, especially to students who view writing as a mysterious process. My tutoring experiences have helped me accept the importance of each step of

writing. I am willing to spend the time outlining and prewriting instead of rushing to get something down on paper that looks like the final product. When I saw Jane's determination to understand simple concepts, John's willingness to spend an hour on one sentence, and Mike's acceptance of outside help, I knew that little strokes could eventually fell the big oaks.

*Dot Stacy
Monroe County Community College
Monroe, MI*

It happens to everyone: The nightmare in the first year

It was my first year as a tutor in the Writing Center at the University of Vermont. I was new to the job but surprisingly enough, the first four weeks had been going extremely well. Nervous during my first few sessions, I was pleased by my fifth week to see that I was not getting as anxious before meeting with a student. I was slowly but surely becoming more and more relaxed and confident that I was actually helping people. It started to feel good, until I met David.

I had read a few articles and stories about "nightmare sessions" written by other tutors and was feeling grateful that I had not had such traumatic experiences in the writing center. Such luck was bound to change eventually.

I sat at the round table in the Writing Center waiting for my appointment. When David walked in we greeted each other with smiles and friendly hellos. He took a seat to my right, slouching back and folding his hands across his stomach. I was glad to see this extremely relaxed position—I thought it meant that this guy was easy-going and was going to be no trouble at all.

I needed to fill out a bit of paper work required by the writing center before we got started on his paper, so I proceeded by asking him the necessary information. Naturally, I wrote "David" in the line marked "Name" on the Log Note and then asked him to spell his last name. He told me it was Coletti. Not willing to take any chances on spelling his last name wrong, I asked him to spell it for me. He smiled and said, "Well I can see I'm not working with a spelling expert here." We chuckled—him pleased with his delightful sense of humor, me with an undertone of non-appreciation. Of course I was not a spelling expert, I was a writing expert, and writing experts use dictionaries sometimes to help with spelling. I was sure that I would not find his last name in the latest edition of Webster's Unabridged. I asked him if he wanted a copy of my log notes sent to his professor. I told him that if he did, he would need to sign on the appropriate line. His eyes lit up as he smiled with his pen in his hand and said, "Sure. Get a few kiss ass points." Again, he laughed at his own witty sense of humor. This time, I grinned.

David had brought a history paper. When I asked him what he wanted to work on, he told me he just wanted to make sure the paper was "okay," and he handed me his work. So, as I had learned in my tutoring class, I asked David if it would help him to hear the paper read aloud or if he would care to read it to me. He said, "No. Actually, I have to make a phone call so why don't you read my paper while I do that." This took me aback. I was so completely shocked that I agreed. He left the room and I let out a deep sigh, shrugged my shoulders, and began to read his paper. I was too angry to even concentrate on his work. Plus, I could hear him outside using the phone, speaking to his friend about some kind of driving arrangements. I was so disgusted. My eyes simply meandered over the words until he came back in.

When he arrived back in the room, I had finished looking at his paper, and again I asked him what he wanted to work on. He said, "Well, this guy's a stickler for grammar, so . . ."

"So you just want to work on basic editing then?"

“Yeah, whatever,” was his response in a frustrated tone, as if I was wasting his time by making such foolish inquiries. He must have been thinking to himself that I was obviously not a mind-reading expert either.

I began to read the paper aloud, line by line. As I was reading his paper, he picked up a book off the table and started flipping through it like one would flip through a magazine in a waiting room at a doctor’s office. My Irish blood began to heat up as I moved my attention to him and said, “Okay. I can’t do this for you.” I put the paper down.

He was put off by my extreme rudeness and said, “Okay, fine, what do you want me to do?”

What I wanted him to do was get up and leave, but instead I asked him when the assignment was due. He looked at his watch, then at me, and said, “Like now.”

“Great,” I thought to myself. I was working with a Class-A procrastinator. I too am a master procrastinator, but I always do my work myself. I don’t expect others to do it for me. I replied stunned, “Oh, okay.”

Flustered and frustrated, I tried to fix his mistakes for him. He held a pen in his hand and put the needed punctuation in the places I pointed out to him. I was rushing through it as David sat there tapping his fingers like I was taking up too much of his time. After about five minutes, we were at the end of his paper. He asked if he could use the computer in the room, and I told him he could. It turned out that he had forgotten his disk, so he couldn’t use it after all. He thanked me quickly as he left, and I let out a huge sigh of relief. The entire session lasted about twenty minutes. It was my shortest but most painful session.

I could have cried when it was over. I did everything that I was not sup-

posed to do. I let David “push” me around by submitting to his request to make phone calls while I read his paper. Most importantly, I did not do my job as a tutor. I had finally had my nightmare session. Knowing that I had not actually helped David, I was completely disappointed with myself. I had failed as a tutor, and I was not going to forgive myself for it. Tutors are not editors. We are not there to put punctuation into papers. We are there to help students and guide them through their work, teaching them along the way. We are there to help them understand their mistakes, not fix them for them. But with such a limited amount of time, I rushed through David’s paper doing exactly that. I was also sure that if David’s grade suffered, which I could not see how it wouldn’t, I would be blamed. David would hold me responsible for his bad grade, and this made me feel terrible. I certainly did not sign up to be a tutor hoping to make students do worse!

What happened to me that day in the writing center has surely happened to tutors across the world. We have all had students come in, expecting us to fix their papers for them. If a student does this, some explaining needs to be done. I should have let David know that the writing center is not an editing center. It is a place where we can work together, not for one another. As long as I am respectful and tactful, I have the right to “disappoint” students with this news. I have the right to be respected, just as I respect the students.

I took two important lessons away from my nightmare session. First of all, I learned that just because I had one bad session does not make me a bad tutor. I had been very successful until that meeting with David, and I have been successful since that meeting. If David’s grade was going to suffer, I would have to reassure myself that it was due to his own lack of effort, not mine. I did what I could at the given time and date. I did not neglect the student or his needs. Though I did

not meet my own expectations of how a successful session should go, I at least tried to work with what was handed to me. It is not appropriate for me to carry around guilt over what a student may get for a grade. I would have to get over it, and eventually I did.

Secondly, I began to explore exactly what my expectations are of a successful session. All tutors strive to have excellent sessions with every tutee, so what would constitute this ideal meeting? I like to think of it as a good game of catch. Clearly, David and I did not play a good game. Every good pitcher needs a good catcher, and vice versa. The ideal tutoring session is one where both the tutee and the tutor are catching and pitching. It is a learning experience for both parties. Kenneth Bruffee, in his article “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” emphasizes “collaborative learning” in peer tutoring. He “argues that thought and writing are special artifacts grounded in conversation. As such, both are being fostered by teaching that emphasizes conversational exchange among peers” (Bruffee 3). Peer tutoring is a two-way street, where each side is both contributing and taking away from the session. “The tutee brings to the conversation knowledge of the subject to be written about and knowledge of the assignment. The tutor brings to the conversation knowledge of the conventions of discourse and knowledge of standard written English” (Bruffee 10). I have worked with students on topics that I knew nothing about at the beginning of the session, and, by the end, I was a bit more knowledgeable. Hopefully, many a tutee has walked away with a better understanding of writing, either within a specific discipline, or as a general process. Either way, both the tutor and the tutee should be gaining, not losing, from a session in a writing center. Because this mutual process was certainly lacking from my time spent with David, I find it is safe to call such an experience a “nightmare.”

Of course, the ideal tutorial cannot be actualized every time. But it has happened, and I am sure it will happen again to me. Nightmare sessions will also come and go, but all we, as tutors, can do, is to strive for the ideal session, remembering and learning from our mistakes in the past. As a first-year tutor myself, it has been easy to become discouraged by "nightmare sessions." But it is always important to keep the game of catch in mind, and to aim at achieving the continuous process of catching and pitching. When a student

comes in, and a nightmare session begins, we have to try to not feel threatened, but instead aim to turn the session around into a good game of catch. Letting our emotions take control, as I did with David, only adds fuel to the fire. Instead, it is important to keep your cool and direct the energy of a session towards a worthwhile cause: the student.

*Lauren Finan
University of Vermont
Burlington, VT*

Work Cited

Bruffee, Kenneth A. "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring*. Ed. Toni-Lee Capossela. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1998. 127-138.

Writing Center Director Worcester State College

Assistant Professor of English, Tenure-track. Completed Ph.D. required, no ABDs. Specialty in composition and/or rhetoric to coordinate campus writing center and writing across the curriculum initiatives. Experience/interest in ESL a strong plus. Two three-hour courses and two-course release to direct the campus writing center. Academic advising expected. Send application letter

and complete dossier (including vita, three recent letters of recommendation and transcripts) and self-addressed, stamped envelope to Director of Human Resources, Worcester State College, 486 Chandler Street, Worcester, MA 01602. Please respond by November 15, 2001, in order to allow time to screen. Initial interviews will be conducted by telephone.

IWCA Board Meeting at NCTE

Our IWCA Board Meeting at NCTE will take place on Saturday, November 17, from 5:15 to 6:30 p.m., in the Conference Center, room 326. It might be listed in the program as a Special Interest Group, but it's the meeting, all right. Everyone is invited.

*Paula Gillespie, IWCA Vice
President
Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI*

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

Feb. 22-23, 2002: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Clear Lake, TX
Contact: Chloe Diepenbrock, Box 77, University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2700 Bay Area Blvd. Houston, TX 77058. Phone: 281-283-3356 (office); 281-283-3360 (fax); e-mail: Diepenbrock@cl.uh.edu.

April 4-6, 2002: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Canton, Ohio
Contact: Jay D. Sloan, Kent State University-Stark Campus, 6000 Frank Ave. N.W., Canton, OH 44720-7599. E-mail: jsloan@stark.kent.edu; phone: 330-244-3458; fax: 330-494-1621.

April 11-13, 2002: International Writing Centers Association, in Savannah, GA
Contact: Donna Sewell, Dept. of English, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA 31698. Phone: 229-333-5946; fax: 229-259-5529; e-mail: dsewell@valdosta.edu.

April 19-20, 2002: Northeast Writing Centers Association, in Smithfield, RI
Contact: J.P. Nadeau (jnadeau@bryant.edu) or Sue Dinitz <sdinitz@zoo.uvm.edu>. Conference website: <<http://web.bryant.edu/~ace/WrtCtr/NEWCA.htm>>.

ESL theory and practice: Is it portable?

Recent contributions to the *Writing Lab Newsletter* stress the importance of investigating contrastive rhetorical approaches in our ESL tutoring. For example, Catherine Crowley notes the advantage of learning “about international students’ backgrounds and try[ing thereby] to understand the seemingly odd conventions of their writing” (3). And Blau et al. further Judith Powers’ assertion that writing center consultants work as cultural informants, stressing the reciprocal nature of that kind of cultural exchange. ESL writers benefit from sharing the different attitudes they bring to composing a text because their “informants,” in turn, reveal the different cultural rationales behind Anglo-American conventions of writing and reading, which are sometimes practiced unconsciously and therefore may not be transmitted in the classroom.

Valuable as these findings about contrastive rhetoric are, researchers must begin to consider the characteristics and demands of the academic institution where their ESL clients are served and the particular goals that international writers, depending on their background, bring to the writing center table at that institution. For a successful writing center theory at one institution can backfire at another. After five years of successfully employing contrastive methods with ESL students at New York University, the institution where I trained and worked as a consultant, I encountered a surprisingly negative reaction to these methods among students and faculty at the college I next joined. The reaction was so serious that it ultimately caused me to edit my thoughts and questions about contrastive rhetoric during writing center sessions, even at the cost of con-

veying to ESL writers crucial insights about the culture of American academic composition. This opposition to contrastive methods calls into question all blanket theoretical assumptions about tutoring ESL students, which may not be transportable.

At New York University, a large, private Research 1 institution with “the largest group of international students in the U.S.—over 4,000 from 130 different countries” out of a student body of 50,000 (Szenes and Young)—I developed gratifying and enduring relationships with several ESL students from Japan and Korea. Though high-ranking, the college and graduate school are flexible about required linguistic preparedness and allow students extended years of study to complete their degrees. My writers imagined themselves on an extended voyage into American culture that included, but did not necessarily emphasize, wrestling with academic assignments. They were also surrounded by colleagues whose aim was not a high GPA; for example, many students whom I saw from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, who took pride in their creative approaches to essay writing, often flouted the instructors’ guidelines. International students particularly enjoyed writing the autobiographical essays included in the first semester writing workshop sequence, which allowed them to dwell on their diverse backgrounds. These students responded well to questions about how their cultural origins shape their written expression.

Indeed, much of my rapport with long-term ESL clients at that university was strengthened, as Blau et al. suggest, when I asked how their back-

ground might inform their works-in-progress. Sometimes a question as generic as—“Why did you choose to begin your essay *this way*?—encouraged writers to reveal their native assumptions about structure or reader response. Other times, I asked more bluntly: “How did you persuade your readers when writing in Japanese, and are you using a similar approach in this piece?” At NYU, my direct or indirect lines of questioning generated fruitful responses. Moreover, our discussions about non-English conventions addressed both higher and lower order concerns (Severino, Gillespie and Lerner). Nomi, one of my weekly Japanese students, expressed her appreciation when I asked in our first session, in a direct manner, about her tentative approach in advancing a central argument. She explained the Japanese politesse implied in what John Hinds calls a quasi-inductive topic development. And she added, “I am pleased to have my native training considered and not to be told that saving the point of the paper to the end is simply wrong, that this is not the way to write.” Nomi took vigorous notes when I offered the contrastive expectations of English readers, who look for an immediate bold claim and might lose interest or patience without such guidance. Another client seemed empowered when offered the chance to explain her cultural rationale for “choosing so few words in a sentence to explain the idea that you just spoke about at such length.” As we dissected the structure of her sentence, Yoon taught me about the Korean logic of condensed syntax, that is, containing subject and object in the same semantic unit. Several sessions later she reflected that giving me “such a lesson” helped her to remember not to conflate “the actor and the

recipient of the verb in English.” I left that institution confident about the generative results of eliciting the writer’s knowledge of her mother tongue. Over the years, I gained great respect for the ability of these writers to articulate the cultural practices that informed their composition and to realize that they were not portable, that a new culture of writing must be mastered.

Then I became Director of the Writing Center at Barnard College and learned about the problem of automatically importing practices from the culture of one academic institution to another, even when they are located merely 45 minutes apart, at different points on the map of Manhattan. Part of Columbia University, Barnard is a small, highly selective, private, women’s liberal arts college. While international students constitute over 10% of its population (270 are expected in a student body of 2,340 this academic year), there were clues both in the expectations of students and in the requirements of the college that acting as a cultural informant might not work in this locale. For example, at Barnard, which is, unlike NYU, steeped in the competitive academics of the ivy league, the ESL students who signed up for sessions showed greater urgency about becoming fluent writers and earning high grades. Accustomed to achieving high standards in their high schools, they did not expect to need long-term help. Yet many, like Nomi and Yoon from NYU, arrived from their home countries during high school or just before college, and ultimately needed multiple or on-going sessions. These students confront in their first year demanding literary, critical composition assignments, and the majority are not invited to explore their personal cultural backgrounds in their writing. Despite all of these marked institutional differences, I acted according to my past experience. Upon encountering rhetorical patterns such as the absence of lexical links between sentences or the predominance of abstract general ideas (when the as-

signment required close reading of textual details), I pursued the usual inquiry into the culture behind the text. Many students did not respond to such inquiries, but one, in particular, who was deeply offended by them, finally triggered my realization that contrastive rhetoric was a potentially inflammatory tool in my present institutional setting.

When I asked Jin—who had noted on our feedback form that she had come to America from China during high school—“what have you written (or do you still like to write) in Chinese,” she responded with a silence that puzzled me. I understood that she wanted to get down to business and “correct the grammatical and structural mistakes that undermine[d her] . . . freshman composition and resubmit it.” This was the instructor’s comment that Jin had pointed to in response to my opening question—“what do you want to work on?” I wondered too whether she also feared or lacked interest in building a relationship with the Director of what was otherwise a peer writing center, and hoped not to need to work long-term. After I asked “what makes you silent,” and then received no answer throughout a long minute, I explained my question. “I ask writers about their linguistic backgrounds because I am interested in understanding how their past training might or might not shape their present writing choices.” Redirecting our attention to the text, I expressed curiosity about her apparent choice to follow a paragraph about the immorality of Ophelia’s suicide from a Christian point of view with the next one about the role of ghosts in dramatic literature. I had in mind the hope of addressing the inexplicit transitions common to many freshman drafts and noted by Fan Shen as an intentional attribute of Chinese composition, in which readers are expected to create cohesion between ideas. But as Jin sat further back in her seat, and I saw her lips tighten, I felt that I had lost her. I tried to have her navigate the course of our session so

that it addressed her need to “correct the grammatical and structural mistakes” rather than my wish to establish a “cultural exchange.” However, she left soon after and did not return to see me. Yet she let her profound sense of insult about my line of questioning be known.

Jin did not confront me but confided to another tutor that she believed my questions were “racist.” This accusation reached the Director of the Writing Program who expressed her concern about raising contrastive rhetoric with students who might see it as an invasion of their privacy or a pointless reminder of their difference. I began to realize from this and other conversations on campus, during a long and ongoing inquiry about the sensibility of ESL students at the college, that many want to identify themselves primarily with American academic culture. Many of our international students have studied in the U.S. since high school or grammar school, and other more recent arrivals have a varying level of written fluency ranging from basic to highly sophisticated. Some, from various cultural backgrounds, admitted that they “detest the nomenclature ‘ESL.’” In several informal gatherings among writing tutors and students whom we now call bi- or multi-lingual writers, I came to understand that not all but a great number of students in this highly competitive and exclusive environment feel their difference as marginality. Often, it seems, these individuals want to move beyond their origins, rather than exploit this “spicy ingredient” in their writing, as Olenka, an NYU student who emigrated from the Ukraine during high school, once called it. The required writing curriculum, for the most part, does not ask them to do otherwise. Because the desire to master American academic culture can be intense, a question probing one’s contrastive rhetoric or cultural diversity can be received as a painful affront. One tutor, imagining the situation of a bi-lingual writer in gender terms, said “I’d be of-

fended in the same way if, just because I write 'perhaps' and use passive voice, a male tutor asked me: Do you think that your writing has been affected by traditional expectations of femininity?"

A theory like contrastive rhetoric can be highly generative at other schools, and it is indispensable to our understanding of the choices writers may make and the cultural stretches they must traverse. Therefore, I continue to address it with my tutors at Barnard. However, I stress that given the academic pressures at such a competitive institution, the possibility that one's language or culture of origin colors her writing is best kept in mind. It can help the tutor as she considers what the writer may need to learn in order to revise her draft. But at our writing center, where bi- and multi-lingual students want to affirm equality with their peer tutors and seek urgently to reach a sophisticated level of academic literacy, an emphasis on contrastive rhetoric may be experienced as

marginalizing if not discriminatory and ought to be raised only by the writer herself.

ESL writers wrestle with untranslatable rhetorical and semantic systems. So too, writing center directors, who make the journey from one university setting to another, must examine whether the research and practice concerning ESL and other populations of writers may not directly translate in their new institutional home. Our local research must be contrastive too.

Marylou Gramm
Barnard College
New York, NY

Works Cited

- Blau, Susan R., John Hall, Jeff Davis, and Lauren Gravitz. "Tutoring ESL Students: A Different Kind of Session." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 25.10 (2001): 1-4.
- Crowley, Catherine. "Are We On the Same Page? ESL Student Perceptions of the Writing Center." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 25.9 (2001): 1-5.
- Gillespie, Paula and Neal Learner. *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*. Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon, 2000.
- Hinds, John. "Inductive, Deductive, Quasi-Inductive: Expository Writing in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Thai." *Coherence in Writing*. Ed. Ulla Connor and Ann M. Johns. Alexandria: TESOL, 1990: 87-110.
- Severino, Carol. "Serving ESL Students." *The Writing Center Resource Manual*. Ed. Bobbie Bayliss Silk. Emmitsburg: NWCA, 1998. IV.2-IV.2.7.
- Shen, Fan. "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 40.4 (December 1989): 459-466.
- Szenes, Gail C., and Nancy E. Young. "Resource Guide for NYU International Students." NYC: NYU Office for International Students and Scholars, n.d. <<http://www.nyu.edu/pages/osl/offices/oiss>> August 5, 2001.

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
