

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 27, Number 4

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

December, 2002

## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

In this month's newsletter, you'll find Joan Hawthorne's response to the persistent call for writing center research. In her essay she argues for using discourse analysis as a valuable and appropriate methodology for studying tutorials. If you are using discourse analysis, what questions have you been addressing with this method of research? What other questions and methodologies are you exploring? Or, another way for you to join the discussion is to consider two articles about writing centers in unusual contexts, one in East Africa and the other in a science and engineering university. Does your writing center exist in yet another unusual context?

In short, the phrase in the newsletter's masthead above invites an exchange of voices and ideas—and that means all of us. That is, every newsletter essay is one author's voice contributing to a conversation on that topic. Do join in. And invite tutors to do the same. As is evident in the tutors' essays by Ildikó Carrington and Dawn Johnson—and in Bonnie Devet's description of what her tutors have contributed to her writing lab—undergraduate tutors are also valuable contributors to our discussions.

• Muriel Harris, editor

## ...INSIDE...

*Researching the Conference (Why We Need Discourse Analysis)*

• Joan Hawthorne 1

*Culture and Composition: Starting a Writing Center in East Africa*

• Ann Miller 6

*Conference Calendar* 9

*Tutors' Column:*

*"Tutoring International Graduate Students"*

• Ildikó Carrington 10

*"Brainstorming' Tutoring Tools"*

• Dawn Johnson 11

*Invisible Writing Lab Consultants*

• Bonnie Devet 12

*"Go to the Writing Center": The Writing Center's Growing Authority in a Science and Engineering University*

• Emily F. Nye 14

## Researching the conference (Why we need discourse analysis)

We think we know certain things about writing center work, and it feels good, in a "young" discipline, to finally attain that level of confidence. But what do we know for sure? And do we know these things by systematically observing real tutors during real sessions, or by *thinking* about sessions as we imagine they are? I'm hardly the first person to point out that too much of what we think we know is based on theorizing about practice, and too little is based on empirical research. In the 1980s, when Stephen North wrote "The Idea of a Writing Center," he noted that we needed research that would look much more closely at writing center sessions (28-29). Still, seventeen years after publication of that oft-read North article, a significant gap remains between what we believe we know and what we really know about writing center practice.

This gap is beginning to be addressed. Beginning in the 1990s, there have been a number of presentations and publications that have included reports on studies conducted using dis-

course analysis as a tool for close examination of writing center sessions. The variety among the studies serves to emphasize the versatility of the technique, and the breadth of knowledge that can be gained from its use. One researcher brings linguistics interests and training, and uses discourse analysis as a technique for analyzing turn-taking behavior or assertions of authority within tutor-writer conversations. Another brings an interest in tutor training and uses it as a means for encouraging tutors to notice and possibly diversify their range of tutoring strategies.

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**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).

But there is common ground among the different approaches. In general, discourse analysis studies begin with tapes, audio or video, of tutoring sessions. The taped sessions are transcribed, in whole or in part, using conventions that make visible key aspects of the sessions, although which aspects are key depends on the particular study. The length of a silence, for example, may be important for some research questions, so measures of wait time might be included. Overlapping talk is common and often salient; various markings can be used during transcribing to indicate the sections of talk that overlap. The change in tone at the end of a sentence that distinguishes a question from a statement will probably be indicated.

Researchers review these specialized transcripts carefully, coding tutor and/or student talk and other behaviors, usually according to a scheme that emerges from consideration of both the research question and the data itself. In other words, one researcher might code according to tutor or writer purpose (e.g., gathering information; offering encouragement; requesting help); another coding system might be organized around affiliation or authority behaviors (e.g., face-saving; deferring to the other; establishing credibility). This coding makes it possible for the researcher to analyze transcripts systematically, in search of patterns that help address a hypothesis or answer a question of interest.

Unfortunately, discourse analysis sounds intimidating, not for the faint of heart (or, realistically, the typically time-crunched writing center director). Would-be researchers are put off by the need for prior review and approval (for many projects) by the institution's human subjects research review board, by concerns about the willingness of tutors and writers to be taped, by the overwhelming amount of transcribing that could potentially be involved. And yet there are pressing reasons for pursuing this kind of work. Part of the im-

petus, no doubt, is the simple recognition that discourse analysis is a rich and relatively untapped source of important insight into writing center practice. Doctoral students seeking fresh territory for dissertation work are naturally attracted to good research opportunities. But a more important factor driving the new research, I think, is the feeling that there may be a mismatch between our theories and our practices, a mismatch that can be addressed only through a more thorough analysis of writing center sessions as they occur in practice. Nancy Grimm's *Good Intentions* articulates especially clearly this sense that our "knowledge" about writing center work may be rooted in inadequately examined theorizing about our work and its role within the university at large.

Grimm's book challenges us to re-evaluate our understanding of what help means within the context of the writing center, inviting us to think about questions like whether "hands-off" is really the most appropriate tutor role during conferences, and whether non-directivity is really best for the writer's development (31). But these are questions that can hardly be answered adequately until we can examine and describe what happens in sessions, when the tutor is hands-off but also when the tutor is hands-on, when the tutor is non-directive but also when the tutor is explicitly directive. Grimm is not the only writer to challenge the unwritten rules of writing center practice. Lore says that tutors and students should relate as peers, but that assumption has been called into question by Gillam (50) and Johnson (37-39), as well as Grimm. Lore says that the student should have the dominant role during the conference, but Sperling (234), Blau, Hall, and Strauss (37), and Fletcher (48-50) suggest that good conferencing practice might be much more complicated than is suggested by such a simplification.

In other words, we know enough to be troubled by our theory. We know

enough to notice that practice doesn't always articulate with theory particularly well, and to suspect that we may be better off, sometimes, when practice *doesn't* follow theory.

These are troubling issues in a discipline that seems to be just achieving a certain amount of institutional stability and credibility, and they demonstrate the need for new knowledge, especially the knowledge about practice that can be generated through discourse analysis. We need to know what we do during writing center sessions. We need to analyze the ways tutors talk during sessions, and then examine how that tutor talk seems to influence writers' talk. We need to consider the various strategies that tutors use to open students up, strategies that can be much more nuanced than might be suggested by one of our old rules: the writer should do most of the talking. We need to look at sessions where the writer doesn't talk much at all but which seem to be productive sessions nevertheless; what can we find in that tape or transcript that accounts for the productivity of such a session?

When we can do studies like this and answer questions like these, we'll be much nearer to being able to talk together productively (and accurately) about our practice. And we'll be much nearer to renewed discussions about the intersections between theory and practice, discussions in which theory and practice can each be informed by the other, because those discussions will be rooted in empirical studies that describe the range of current practice.

The need for new knowledge about writing center practice is surely central to any argument for a strengthened focus on writing center research that includes discourse analysis as a technique for close examination of what happens in writing center sessions. But that is hardly the only reason for pursuing such research today. A second, closely related rationale is purely practical: new tutors must be trained for

writing center work every semester, and we are responsible for their development as competent and professional practitioners in our field. One piece of that development is related simply to providing tutors with the knowledge and experiences that they need to understand how to do their job, and we'll know more about how to convey the essence of effective tutoring once we've named and described it via the kinds of research discussed above.

But at the same time as I've been thinking about these tutor-training issues, I've been rereading Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach*. Palmer reminds us that effective teaching doesn't follow a formula and can't be constrained within the bounds of a single model (11). My own belief is that we'll find that Palmer's comments about teaching are equally applicable to tutoring. Most of us who work in writing centers know intuitively that tutoring styles are tremendously varied, as are the writers with whom we work, the papers we see during our sessions, and our own personalities and strengths. And yet, somewhere in the back of our collective minds, we probably share an image of the "ideal tutor," that person who is described in the pages of tutor training manuals and manages to work effectively with all kinds of writers and papers without breaking any of the rules. If additional study of writing center sessions complicates our tutor training, so much the better.

As difficult as it is to provide new employees with an accurate and honest understanding of how we do the work of tutoring, that's really only a first step. Tutors come to us from various backgrounds, depending in part on the particular institution: they may be faculty from English or another academic department, graduate and undergraduate students from various disciplines (sometimes including first year students), or professionals (perhaps retired) from the larger community. Given the low salaries and high de-

mands of tutoring work, I share a general reluctance to pile additional expectations onto the job. But, in an important sense, tutoring is professional work and there are special demands of professionalism that go beyond knowledgeability about the tasks to be done. Ignoring those special demands may not be in the best interests of our tutors, and it is definitely not in the best interests of the students and others who rely on those tutors for help in writing papers.

We recognize that teachers, like most other professionals, need to develop the ability to be self-reflective about their practice. That is, they need to learn to learn to observe and reflect on their practice at the same time as they *do* that practice. Tutors function similarly. We recognize the need for tutor training that covers topics like ethics and both theoretical and practical knowledge about the field (hence the occasionally heated dialogues on WCenter about the importance of training courses). But the professionalization of tutors, particularly undergraduate tutors who may not have prior professional experiences of other sorts to draw on, also demands that we help them hone the skill of self-reflectiveness.

The techniques of discourse analysis are exactly the kinds of strategies that help tutors look more closely and more honestly at their own work. It's difficult during a session, when tutors are necessarily focused on the students and papers in front of them, to practice noticing and reflecting. Sessions are often continuous, with tutors running off from a final session to classes or other meetings. By the time we think back on our work, any clarity or objectivity about our practice may be long gone, buried by the human need to rationalize or defend that practice. The occasional use of discourse analysis, whether for research or for self-evaluation, can inject a healthy dose of reality into our understanding of our own practice. Face to face with our own

tapes or transcripts, even an observer's detailed notes on our own sessions, we see our practice with greater clarity than is otherwise likely. That clarity can be the root, nourished through staff meetings and other kinds of follow-up, for exactly the kind of reflectiveness that writing center directors would like to encourage among tutors.

These concerns about the theory and practice of writing center work, and the applicability of both to the training and development of new tutors, are probably the most important reasons for pursuing research that uses the techniques of discourse analysis. However, a discussion on WCenter reminds me that there may be at least one other reason for using discourse analysis strategies in writing centers. That other reason is the increasing demand for assessment that provides evidence of outcomes.

Much of the work on outcomes on college campuses had its impetus in accreditation standards (although a well-done assessment program should have value that goes beyond satisfying outsiders). The kind of assessment that accreditors are asking of academic departments and programs today is assessment that looks at what students learn as a result of taking classes in their field, or completing a major in that discipline. It shouldn't surprise us that our colleagues across campus, in at least some cases, are expecting writing center directors to talk about learning outcomes as well.

The new standard (and there's no reason to assume that this can't turn out to be a good thing for those of us who care about student learning) demands that faculty look at student learning outcomes in ways that go beyond grades. We in writing centers may want to be proactive in thinking about learning outcomes for the students with whom we work. Since our sessions can be so individualized and since we usually don't know if a given

student will be a one-time user or a regular visitor over a multiple year time span, our opportunities for documenting student learning are quite different. But the techniques and materials used for discourse analysis may be applicable. In reviewing a tape or transcript of a writing center session, I can identify needs or goals, both cognitive and affective that are implicitly or explicitly agreed to by tutor and student. Later during the session, I can hear or see (and even name) the strategies that the tutor used to help the student address those needs. By the end of the session, I can look for evidence in the student's own language that demonstrates whether goals were met, and, more generally, whether learning was achieved. This is an individualized approach to documentation of outcomes, but the writing center is an individualized place; this could be an approach that makes sense. And this general approach to documenting outcomes is exactly consistent with the strategies Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Anderson recommend (149-151), based on their work in assessment for accreditation with faculty on campuses across the country.

I arrived at an interest in discourse analysis because of concerns about a gap that I perceived between theory and practice and the potential impact of that gap on my ability to train tutors effectively; assessment was not my issue. But it makes sense for us to look for approaches to assessment that are intellectually and practically consistent with the kind of work we do and that serve our programs in other ways as well.

Whatever our purposes, the things we learn through discourse analysis methodologies can be directly fed back into our own work as tutors and our work in preparing and supervising undergraduate and graduate tutors. Through a local research project, for example, consultants in our writing center realized that they talk more and

they talk differently during sessions than they had imagined. Conversations about the meaning and implications of such a discrepancy between imagined and actual practice have been a valuable part of our staff development. In a recent presentation, Anne Geller and Neal Lerner reported on a staff development-based research project that involved exchanges of tutors' transcripts. Unhindered by personal relationships with the unknown consultant, tutors were able to see and discuss a surprising level of directiveness that they saw in one transcript excerpt, directiveness which wasn't noticed by the tutor during his own session. That kind of conversation leads naturally to consideration of the role directiveness plays in the tutors' own sessions, and the inconsistencies between their own work and their tutoring theories. Published studies of discourse analysis research reveal a similar pattern of discovery: Blau, Hall, and Strauss noticed the way qualifiers are used in tutorials to enhance the feeling of collaboration, even when the tutor may be offering fairly directive suggestions (37); Fletcher observed and described the ways in which authority gets granted to writers or claimed by the tutor (50); Johnson discovered that 64% of the questions tutors used were requests for information rather than sophisticated tools for provoking more student independence and thought as is often assumed (36).

These demonstrate the kind of understanding of our work that is unlikely to occur in the absence of discourse analysis. Such studies produce findings with both immediate applicability and long-term value, whether the intended focus is on research or tutor development or assessment. That's why researching the conference is worth the work, and why it's so necessary for us in the writing center community.

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## Writing Center Director Western Oregon University

Western Oregon University seeks a Writing Center Director, tenure-track position starting September 2003. Position involves overseeing student tutors in the writing center and teaching writing classes in the English Department.

PhD in composition and rhetoric desirable; writing center experience required. Preferred candidates will have demonstrated coursework/experience/training in several of the following areas: teaching writing at the lower-and upper-division college level; supervision and training of writing center tutors; professional development/in-service workshops for faculty; writing across the curriculum/writing in the disciplines. Salary competitive.

Send letter of application, current vita and transcripts, plus three current letters of recommendation to Dr. Curt Yehnert, Chair, Humanities Division, Western Oregon University, Monmouth, OR 97361. Applications accepted until December 15, 2002; open until filled. Western Oregon University is an AA/EOE employer and is committed to fostering diversity in its student body, faculty and staff. <<http://www.wou.edu>>.

## The WAC Journal

The editorial board of *The WAC Journal* seeks WAC-related articles from across the country. Our national review board welcomes 5-15 page double-spaced manuscripts on all WAC-related topics, including the following:

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- WAC Assessment
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Send inquiries, proposals, or 5-15 page double-spaced manuscripts to Roy Andrews via email ([roya@mail.plymouth.edu](mailto:roya@mail.plymouth.edu)). Manuscripts are reviewed September through February. Any standard document style (MLA, APA, etc.) is acceptable.

*The WAC Journal* is peer-reviewed blind and approximately 150 pages long. It is published annually in the summer. For more information <<http://wac.colostate.edu/journal/>>.

# Culture and composition: Starting a writing center in East Africa

One of the convictions that has grown in me over years of living as an American in Africa is that you cannot predict culture. As a teacher of intercultural communication I have a long list of labels useful in describing characteristics of cultural groups. A particular culture might, for example, be classified as individualistic or collectivistic, direct or indirect, vertical or horizontal. However, when it comes to anticipating how these and other factors will combine to produce behavior in a specific situation, observers of culture like myself are as likely as not to guess wrong. This is especially true when an idea is introduced into a culture for the first time.

This realization was at the front of my mind when I became involved in presenting a proposal for the creation of a writing and speech center at the private Kenyan university where I teach. Located on the Athi Plain outside Nairobi, Daystar shares the bush and acacia tress with herds of giraffe, zebra, and Maasai cattle. We are presumably one of the few universities in the world which has ever issued a “lion warning” to students, or killed a 20-foot python on the grounds on graduation day. Beyond our exotic distinctives, many subtle cultural patterns differentiate Daystar from universities in Europe and the U.S. where much of the literature on writing centers originates. Because the writing center concept was unknown in Kenya, and because the two faculty members most closely involved in the effort were Nigerian and American respectively, we realized it was critical to analyze how these cultural characteristics would impact the shape a writing center should take on our campus. In fact, we needed to ask ourselves

whether the idea was viable in our context at all.

There was no question about the perceived need. I can remember for years walking into the faculty lounge and hearing colleagues complaining about the quality of student writing. During the second half of the semester, in term paper season, it became almost a ritual chant among us. Not that the university didn’t make an effort to train its students in writing; all undergraduate students were and are required to take freshman reading and composition courses. However, with enrollment in many sections exceeding 40 students, there was a limit to what could be done about the problem within the classroom, and faculty did not have time to meet individually with all of the students who needed help. Of course, if this scenario were to occur in the U.S., two solutions would quickly spring to mind: start a writing-across-the-curriculum program and/or establish a writing center. In Kenya these options were not so obvious. In 1999, when the Language & Literature and Communication Departments first proposed a joint writing and speech center with the mission of “raising the quality of writing and speech in the Daystar community” through the mechanism of peer tutoring, there were no models of formalized student-to-student academic assistance at the university level anywhere in East Africa. When we tried to explain our vision to others, the most common response was a confused “What?”

As we explored attitudes toward the concept of peer tutoring through faculty and student surveys, focus groups, and interviews, it became clear to our small committee that one key was un-

derstanding the student-teacher relationship within Kenyan society. We already knew that in Kenya differences in status and power are considered a normal part of the social structure. In educational settings this translates into the attitude among students and teachers alike that the teacher is the all-knowing authority and exists on a distinctly different plane than students (Hofstede 34). In primary and secondary schools, for example, the common method of instruction is for teachers to write their lectures on the black board while students silently copy them verbatim into exercise booklets. At the university level the lecture format and accompanying formal classroom relationship continue in a modified form. Faculty we interviewed were concerned that with this gap between the teacher and the taught, student tutors could never hope to garner sufficient respect to be effective. In fact, a few faculty members wondered if students they might refer to a writing and speech center would simply conclude that teachers were unwilling to do their jobs.

In a different vein, some faculty members pointed out that most students had already had negative experiences with what Bruffee ( 96) calls “monitor-like” tutoring in the British-inspired prefect system. Virtually all of our students went to high schools where their most outstanding classmates were selected as prefects, and given authority over the academic work and even personal lives of younger or less advanced students. And most students didn’t like it. Those who were not selected got the message loud and clear that they were not the best; those who were selected were left with the uncomfortable task of trying

to appear both superior and equal to their peers. Some high schools, in fact, carried the system a step further and segregated students into streams: one for the A students, another for the B students, and so on. Would a student-staffed writing center bring back negative associations to students and damage their self-image? Although we did not believe that peer tutoring needed to involve this kind of unhealthy competition, it was clear that we would have to explain the concept of the center in such a way that people did not misinterpret it.

Interestingly, our research indicated that students took a different view. As long as student staff in the proposed writing and speech center acted like peers, and did not even attempt to take on the role of teacher, student respondents indicated they would be comfortable going to them for assistance. Evidently in their minds the solution to the question of establishing credibility in the face of the gulf between students and teachers was for student workers not to present themselves as experts at all. In fact, it was precisely because of the huge gap existing between themselves and their instructors that they found the idea of peer tutoring appealing. Several observed that they would not feel comfortable going to an instructor and asking for help, but they would not mind asking a fellow student.

In the end we decided to approach what appeared to be two different constituencies in different ways. Adhering to the requirements of senior administrators who approved the proposed center, we made criteria for peer tutors very select. To be considered for the position students must have a cumulative GPA of 3.0 (that in an educational system where the rule of thumb is still that only 10% of students in a given class should get A's). They must also get at least a B+ in freshman composition, bring letters of recommendation from at least two faculty members, and demonstrate strong writing ability. Be-

fore they begin working at the center, peer tutors must take a 3-credit semester-long course in advanced writing and speaking consultation. This honors-program approach might appear antithetical to fully collaborative peer tutoring, and yet it was imperative to establish credibility with faculty and administration.

On the other hand, it was clear that students needed to be assured that student staff were truly their equals. Obviously managing to create both impressions simultaneously is no easy feat. We began with carefully considering through discussion with our first set of student tutors-in-training as well as in the student focus groups exactly what our workers should be called. Everyone agreed "tutor" wouldn't do; it had too many connotations of remedial work. "Student teacher" and "teaching assistant" were ruled out immediately because they appeared to leap over the gap between student and teacher statuses. "Consultant" was rejected as pretentious. In the end the students chose the non-threatening term "student assistant." Similarly, we realized that posting the student assistants' names and photos on bulletin boards or future web pages would set them apart in a way that could compromise their peer status. On the positive side, in response to comments in the student focus groups, we determined to make our small designated space as student-like and homey as possible, beginning with posters and a carpet on the concrete floor. True to the British colonial legacy in Kenya we also provide tea for regular group sessions.

The student assistant dilemma of filling both expert and peer roles extends into the content of tutoring sessions, but for different reasons. We serve a technically 100% ESL population. Although many students at Daystar began speaking English in their pre-school years, it is not their parents' first tongue, and even among the most fluent of them, linguistic patterns from their first languages creep in. Because

of this, our student assistants must be able not only to instinctively spot grammatical problems, but also to explain underlying rules and conventions. One recently observed that she feels like she is studying for a grammar quiz every time she prepares for a meeting with a new client.

As we have examined American authored textbooks such as the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, *Writing Center Resource Manual*, and Ken Bruffee's *Collaborative Learning* with both our first and second sets of student-assistants-in-training, we have probed them to critically analyze every reading for appropriateness to the African cultural context. We have concluded that strict minimalist tutoring is not adequate for many of our clients, depending as it does on drawing existing grammatical knowledge out of the tutee. An approach closer to that described by Hawthorne, where student assistants learn to alternate between directive and non-directive approaches depending on the specific client and problem, is more useful. The extensive knowledge of grammar required of student assistants is another reason that the tutor training course spans an entire semester, and even then leaves some issues untouched for lack of time.

A sizeable number of students come to Daystar from non-Anglophone nations outside of Kenya. One of our student assistants has labeled this group "ETL"—or "English as a third language"—to distinguish their difficulties from the rest of the student population. Students from these nations are given a language proficiency test upon admission. If they do not pass, the university provides an initial semester of nothing but English training on a non-credit basis. From one of our focus groups composed entirely of non-Anglophone students, we learned that ETL students on campus were eager to take advantage of any opportunity to improve their English, but also felt their needs were forgotten once they finished the initial intensive language

course. We had already seen this during a year-long pilot program of faculty tutoring where many students from this group eagerly volunteered to be involved in ongoing assistance when it was offered. As a result, we decided from our first semester of full operation to reach out especially to these students. In addition to being available to them for one-to-one sessions, the center has organized two weekly conversational groups which, in contrast to the formal lecture setting of their English class, offer an opportunity to talk in a relaxed environment on topics the students can select themselves.

Another reality in our environment sounds more economic than cultural, but it affects us at every turn: African universities do not have money. As recently as 1998 only 20% of universities on the continent had full Internet connectivity. Most have embarrassingly few journals in their libraries, and some find it difficult to support even photocopying of syllabi and handouts for classes ("Wiring African Universities"). Our university is typical in this regard. Developers of the writing and speech center knew from the beginning that we would have to operate on next to nothing. In comparison, for example, to start up equipment and operating costs of \$21,300 detailed in a recent article about the speech center at a small private university in the U.S. (Hobgood 349), we proposed a spartan initial budget for our writing and speech center of \$3000. This figure included purchase of equipment, payment of student assistants, and ongoing operational expenses. We were requested to reduce it by half.

On a day-to-day basis that meant a number of cost-cutting measures, some drastic. For example most of our forms fit onto a half sheet of paper, our bowl of chocolate candy eclairs is donated by an interested faculty member, and most of our written resource material is currently in the form of photocopies from the private libraries of several in-

structors. Our student-assistants-in-training are on budgets similar to that of the center. They cannot afford to buy expensive textbooks for the training course, so single copies of readings are placed on reserve in the library. Our request for a used computer for record keeping looks like a pipe dream for now, but we continue to hope.

Wealth and poverty are relative, of course. Although it would certainly not look good in a U.S. school for a writing center to scrape by on less than \$2000 a year, in Africa it is do-able. Beyond that, the tiny budget makes us more aware that our greatest resource is unquestionably our student assistants. Their enthusiasm and creativity has been inspiring. In our first semester of operation they have leaped into tutoring. The first week we put out sign-up sheets for appointments, two-thirds of the available appointment slots were filled within 48 hours and we have continued at about the same usage rate since. One of our staff has single-handedly designed and begun to implement a program of training fourth-year students for the post-university environment through mock employment interviews and feedback on student CV's. Another has taken the fledgling ESL program and, with assistance from a visiting faculty member, started the two conversational groups plus individual ESL tutoring. A third created a set of center Web pages that will be among the first links on the much awaited university Web site.

Our small budget also means we need to get creative in our funding options. Locating outside funding looks like our next step, either through grants or possibly through becoming partially self-supporting by offering services to the community outside of the university. One of our current class of student-assistants-in-training, a marketing major, is helping us begin to explore these ideas.

The adjustments for attitudes toward teacher/student relations, implications of the high percentage of ESL students

on our campus, and limitations in funding will undoubtedly be only the first of many that must be undertaken to make the writing and speech center at Daystar fit its own environment. In just our third semester of faculty tutoring and our first with student assistants, we still have much to learn about what shape the center needs to take in order to be effective. Although we have been conducting background research for a year and a half now, we still lack firm figures on who exactly is using the center and why. It is too early to say whether the nearly overwhelming numbers of students will continue to fill our appointment slots, or whether the flood will slow down once the novelty wears off. Still, the lessons we have learned so far, and the process of discovering them have been invigorating. The unpredictability of culture is part of the adventure.

Ann Miller  
Daystar University  
Nairobi/Kenya

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## Southeastern Writing Centers Assn. Awards

The SWCA Achievement Award is offered annually to a recipient who demonstrates excellence in writing center administration and contributes to the SWCA and the writing center community through volunteerism, research, and other scholarly activities. This year, SWCA also announces the SWCA Peer Tutor Award. The SWCA Peer Tutor Award will be presented annually to a writing center consultant who demonstrates significant contributions to his or her institution through tutoring and other scholarly activities. The award will also recognize a peer tutor's contributions to the SWCA and the larger writing center community. Recipients of both awards will be recognized with plaques and cash prizes at the 2003 SWCA Conference in Charlotte.

The SWCA Awards Committee encourages writing center directors, administrators, and peer consultants to nominate individuals who have made outstanding contributions to their schools and the writing center field. Please see <<http://www.uncc.edu/writing/conference/awards.html>>. The deadline for receipt of materials for both awards competitions is December 15, 2002. Inquiries regarding sub-

mission of nominations or awards materials should be directed to Jennifer Liethen Kunka, co-chair of the SWCA Awards Committee, at [jkunka@fmarion.edu](mailto:jkunka@fmarion.edu) or (843) 661-1520.

## Writing Center/WAC Coordinator

### Worcester State College

Asst. Prof. of English, Tenure-track. Completed Ph.D. preferred, advanced ABDs considered. Specialty in composition and/or rhetoric to coordinate campus writing center and WAC initiatives. Experience/interest in ESL a strong plus. Two three-credit courses and a two-course release per semester to direct the writing center and coordinate WAC activities. Academic advising expected.

Interested applicants should send a letter of interest, curriculum vitae, original transcripts (highest degree) and three original, current professional letters of reference to: Director of Human Resources, Worcester State College, 486 Chandler Street, Worcester, MA 01602-2597. Please respond by December 15, 2002. This position is contingent on approval of funding.

## Registration begins for IWCA Summer Institute

IWCA is pleased to announce a summer institute for writing center directors and professionals, to be held at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, July 27 - August 1, 2003. This institute will give new (and experienced) university, community college, and secondary writing center directors the chance to meet for an intensive week with veteran directors. The institute will offer in-depth introductions to—and the chance to discuss the latest about—writing center programs, administration, pedagogy, politics, research, assessment, OWLs, and much more.

Co-chairs and leaders for the 2003 institute include: Brad Hughes (U. of Wisconsin-Madison), Paula Gillespie (Marquette), Muriel Harris (Purdue), Pam Childers (The McCallie School), Jon Olson (Penn State University Park), Jill Pennington (Lansing Community College), James Inman (U. of South Florida), and Neal Lerner (MIT).

Registration will be limited to 40 participants. For more info: <[www.wisc.edu/writing/institute](http://www.wisc.edu/writing/institute)>.

## Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

February 13-15, 2003: Southeastern WCA, in Charlotte, NC  
**Contact:** Deanna Rogers, Writing Resources Center, 220 Fretwell, 9201 University City Blvd., UNC Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001. Phone: (704) 687-4226; fax: (704) 687 6988; e-mail: [drrogers@email.uncc.edu](mailto:drrogers@email.uncc.edu).  
 Conference Web site: <[www.uncc.edu/writing/wrcindex.html](http://www.uncc.edu/writing/wrcindex.html)>.

February 20-22, 2003: South Central WCA, in Fayetteville, AR  
**Contact:** Carole Lane and Karen Clark ([writcent@uark.edu](mailto:writcent@uark.edu)), Quality Writing Center, University of Arkansas, Kimpel 315, Fayetteville, AR 72701.  
 Conference Web site: <<http://www.uark.edu/campus-resources/qwrtcentr/scwca.htm>>.

March 8, 2003: Northern California WCA, in Monterey, CA  
**Contact:** Natasha Oehlman. E-mail: [ncwca@csumb.edu](mailto:ncwca@csumb.edu); phone: 831-582-4614. Conference Web site: <<http://www.asap.csumb.edu/ncwca>>.

March 27-29, 2003: East Central WCA, in Marietta, OH  
**Contact:** Tim Catalano ([catalant@marietta.edu](mailto:catalant@marietta.edu))  
 Director of the Campus Writing Center, 215 Fifth Street, Marietta College, Marietta, OH 45750  
 <[Catalant@marietta.edu](mailto:Catalant@marietta.edu)>. Conference Web site: <<http://www.marietta.edu/~mcwrite/eastcentral.html>>.

April 5, 2003: Northeast WCA, in Nashua, NH  
**Contact:** Al DeCiccio, Rivier College, 420 South Main St., Nashua, NH. Phone: (603)897-8284; e-mail: [adeciccio@rivier.edu](mailto:adeciccio@rivier.edu). Conference Web site: <<http://web.bryant.edu/~ace/wrtctr/NEWCA.htm>>.

October 23-25, 2003: International Writing Centers Conference and National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, in Hershey, PA  
**Contact:** Ben Rafter, [brafoth@iup.edu](mailto:brafoth@iup.edu). Conference Web site: <[www.wc.iup.edu/2003conference](http://www.wc.iup.edu/2003conference)>.

# TUTORS' COLUMN

## Tutoring international graduate students

As a tutor in the Northern Illinois University Writing Center since 1996, I have worked with international graduate students from Thailand, Japan, Lithuania, South Africa, Korea, China, Taiwan, Nigeria, Jordan, the Dominican Republic, and Iran. An earlier year of teaching English in Tehran had introduced me to students with backgrounds very different from mine, but it did not prepare me for the linguistic and cultural difficulties of helping students with many types of writing assignments: e-mail to foreign universities, application essays to American universities, graduate-course papers, conference presentations, journal articles, and master's theses and dissertations in many disciplines.

Helping international students with these assignments, I have encountered two major kinds of linguistic difficulties. The first, of course, arises from their difficulties with English syntax and idioms. To put the students at ease, I tell them that English is my second language, too: until the age of seven, I spoke only Hungarian. Their difficulties with English, however, are not those of a child learning a new language. Using discipline-specific discourse, they often compound their difficulties by the verbatim translation of such discourse from their native language. Sometimes the stylistic conventions of the discipline, especially in the social sciences, and the patterns of the students' native language function synergistically to produce almost impenetrable tangles. For example, a Chinese doctoral candidate in economics wrote long sentences consisting of strings of compound nouns linked either by forms of "to be" or by passive verbs.

One day, dismayed by a page-long paragraph of such sentences, I exclaimed, "Sounds more like German than English!" When the student protested, "I don't speak German," I wanted to kick myself for making such a negative comment. But when I had explained that German compounds can be much longer and more complicated than English ones, he understood immediately because the same thing is true in Chinese. Armed with this fortuitous insight, I used the analogy of a long freight train sometimes requiring two engines: the strings of nouns in an English sentence, the freight cars, need active, transitive verbs, the engines, to move them along. After I had modeled a few examples for him, he was able to decrease the number of compounds and increase the number of active verbs; gradually his sentences grew shorter and more easily comprehensible. I have recently used this analogy with another Chinese graduate student, who has designed an artificial neural network to assess the readability level of Taiwanese textbooks. From his dissertation I have learned a little more about Chinese compounds. Like his artificial neural network, I can be trained to learn.

That learning brings me to the second linguistic difficulty created by the wide range of disciplines that my international graduate students work in: anthropology, biology, climatology, economics, education, fine arts, political science, psychology, nursing, statistics, and instructional technology. Knowing very little about most of these disciplines, I ask frequent questions to acquire the necessary discipline-specific discourse. When I ask such questions,

of course I initiate role-reversal. Although I practice such role-reversal with American students, too, international students struggling with a foreign culture have much less self-confidence than American students do. But when international students become the authorities teaching me, I notice a dramatic surge both in their self-confidence and their willingness to accept constructive criticism.

The barriers to such willingness, however, are often cultural rather than linguistic. For example, an outstanding Japanese M. A. student in psychology applied to nine doctoral programs at other universities. Helping her write her application essays, I detected her reluctance to emphasize her many accomplishments. These included an article, originally an outstanding graduate-course paper, accepted by a psychology journal, after I had helped her to revise it in accordance with the criticism of two peer reviewers. When I questioned her about this reluctance, she translated a Japanese proverb: "The nail that protrudes is the one that is hammered down." Japanese culture values group cooperation, not individual competition. Once I had convinced her that applying to American doctoral programs is highly competitive and that Americans admire protruding nails instead of punitively flattening them, she agreed to highlight her accomplishments. When she was accepted by the university that was her first choice, she was ecstatic.

A second example of a cultural barrier to accepting constructive criticism occurred in the case of a South African student writing a dissertation on the ef-

fects of apartheid on the education of nonwhites in South Africa. Since she had learned English from British teachers, language was not a problem. Although some British expressions had to be converted into American English for her American audience, her grammar was much better than that of American students. The problem was that in tracing the history of apartheid in South African education, she could not control her plethora of primary and secondary sources because she felt obliged both to quote and to paraphrase every single one of them, even if they made the same point. When I urged combined and condensed paraphrase instead of repetitive individual quotation, she resisted what she initially feared would not only diminish the authority of her writing but also expose her to the possibility of plagiarism. She did not articulate this fear for a long time; she simply dragged her feet in making the revisions I suggested or made only minor changes. Gradually, however, over the course of 14 conferences, I persuaded her to fo-

cus on the crucial statements of her primary sources, both the key engineers and the key critics of the apartheid system. These primary statements she emphasized by quoting; secondary comments on these statements she reduced to paraphrase embedded in the detailed historical explanations she did not initially realize were necessary for an American audience unfamiliar with her country's past.

A third example of a cultural mind-set involves a definition of courtesy radically different from the American concept. Helping an Iranian graduate student e-mail a series of letters to his dissertation advisor at home, I remembered what I had learned in Tehran: Iranians consider it very rude to refuse a request outright. Politely inventing evasions and postponements, they avoid saying what they know the other person does not want to hear. Although they do not intend to fulfill the request, they will never explicitly say, "No." After a long time, the other person is expected to realize what the situation is and to back off in some mutu-

ally acceptable compromise. Working with the graduate student who was reluctant to do what his advisor asked, I was prepared for the evasiveness of his letters. When dissertation advisors are here at the University, I occasionally meet with them to define the students' problems and clarify possible solutions. But in this case, I turned off my American impatience for clear and straightforward communication and did not insist, "Well, why don't you tell your advisor right now and persuade him to agree?" I knew that the student's mode of persuasion was rooted in his own culture.

Despite these linguistic and cultural problems, tutoring international graduate students can be unexpectedly gratifying. "Whenever I write now," a Japanese graduate student confided, "I hear your voice in my head."

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## "Brainstorming" tutoring tools

It has become a sad old song in the Writing Center: "I got a C on this paper and I don't know why," "what does my teacher mean when she says I have no thesis," and "what am I doing wrong?" Only rarely do students say that they need help developing a thesis. Instead, they ask us to check their grammar. And so we sit down and perform triage on these papers: we end up functioning as a kind of thesis-rescue unit, which is exhausting for us and confusing for the students. Their writing "process" is breaking down, and they don't understand why. It may be that they haven't absorbed the concept of writing as a process or that they just don't know what it means. They've been told that what they should do is "brainstorm" a topic, then "freewrite"

on what they've come up with, and then develop a thesis based on this creative work. But this progression isn't as obvious as it sounds. Sometimes we must show students how to extract themselves, and their theses, from the creative swamp.

Student writers can interpret those well-intentioned terms, "brainstorm" and "freewrite," to mean that they should follow their own stream of consciousness. The trouble is that this "process" still looks linear. A writer seems to move from many ideas to progressively fewer, with no hint of the many dead ends or side trips or false starts that thesis hunting entails. The very origin of the word "brainstorm" suggests disorder. It dates from the late

19<sup>th</sup> century as "a severe mental disturbance" and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has come into corporate jargon as a conferencing term. But to the students struggling to define their own ideas, this vagueness is a plague. The concept of "brainstorming" gives students a place to begin, but does nothing to direct their focus. "Freewriting" is also a liberating philosophy for students, but for many it's a one-way street. The writer will wander through a paragraph rewriting the same sentence over again without getting to the point. Once they've finished a "zero" draft, the urge to leave it alone is overwhelming. If we, as tutors, can't understand their point, it must be that we just don't get it. As a result, we may find ourselves in tense situations with students who feel helpless or resentful.

So it happened that in the midst of a particularly thorny tutorial, when the writer was struggling to juggle all the points she was making in the proper order for her thesis statement, she kept glancing back at her ruffled and marked-up paper. I took the paper and put it under a chair. “It can’t hurt you,” I joked. “Let’s try something different.” I cleared off the table and sat across from her. I asked her to take out a blank piece of paper, and asked the following questions in succession:

1. What is this paper about?
2. What are you trying to say?
3. What is your point?
4. What am I (as the reader) supposed to learn?
5. How do you feel about this topic?
6. What did you learn?
7. What do you remember best?

It was intense. I was lucky to have such a flexible writer to experiment on. After the seventh question I said, “This may sound like cruel and unusual punishment, but I’m going to ask you the first three questions again.” Finally, with a sigh, she put her pencil down. I told her to get some air, and then sit and relax and think of all the things she had just forced out of her mind during the exercise. I hoped that she would be able to recover from the questioning and be willing to come back to her topic. I’ve since had success with this

line of questioning in a shorter, more informal fashion. It forces the writer to focus his or her reasoning into a single thought that must be formulated again and again in response to each question.

There’s a tyranny in the printed page that keeps student writers from questioning what they’ve written. They feel trapped into the formulations they’ve set down on paper; they can’t think of new words because they’re looking at the old ones. Often when I ask what their main point is, student writers will show me sentences that don’t completely explain the idea. But when I point out that the statement is incomplete, they always speak up and verbally fill in the missing information. That’s when it struck me that it’s not that the students don’t know what they want to say. It’s that they must look up from the page to find the words.

Perversely, the machine-aided ease of word processing makes computer revision even more difficult than revising from a hard copy. On the screen, a student confronts the displaced word, an abstract signifier twice removed from its object. Language is hard enough without removing it from tangible control. It may be that a student feels an irrational faith in the machine, which for them has become a sort of “writing fairy” (thanks to Carlene

Pote). This phenomenon goes beyond grammar and spelling checkers. Some students are sitting down to a computer, clicking away until they have the required number of pages, and then assuming that because the text looks like a finished product, it is. Often when we show a student where his sentences break down on paper, there’s a moment of shock. Suddenly he sees mistakes that he never noticed onscreen. Of all the predictions that have been made about computers, it is this irrational faith that is most dangerous. A student counting on technology to pick up where pedagogy leaves off can be left holding perfectly printed chaos.

In light of this realization, it is my goal in the Writing Center to help the student writer take control of the tools of writing. It’s very liberating to view the writing process in open-ended terms, but it takes discipline and structure to take an idea from the brainstorming stage to its finished form. We should also be aware of problems that new trends, such as computer composing, may be causing for the writers that we see. As tutors we can use the tools that work for us to help other student writers.

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# Invisible writing lab consultants

Each April, Charleston, SC, is awash with pastel-colored azaleas as fresh and vibrant and lively as an impressionist’s painting. Keats’ “chilly green spring” has arrived with all its delights. Although the coming of spring signals a season of seductive charms, spring also means—for me, as a lab director—the loss of experienced, well-trained consultants, disappearing into graduate school or the world of business. Of course, I could not be happier for them.

Yet their walking out the door means the lab is losing core people. Even if the graduated consultants (or as I think of them, “the invisible consultants”) are not physically present, I have found ways—if only metaphorically—so that they leave something of themselves behind, helping both clients and their fellow consultants as well as keeping the training going on and on, like a never-ending story.

These invisible consultants can be ever present through their publications.

In recent years, several consultants have rewritten their conference presentations and, fortunately, had them published in venues such as the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and *Southern Discourse*. Then, although the consultants have graduated, their articles—along with their voices and experience—remain in the lab. New consultants read the articles written by former colleagues on topics as diverse as *Writing Across the Curriculum* (“Writing Lab Consultants Talk about Helping Students Writing across the Disciplines”),

working with international students (“International Students and the Writing Lab”), and exploring the conversation which occurs in a consultation (“Making the Oral Journey”).

In fact, this past fall seven new tutors read the article “‘Is This an ‘A’ Paper?’: Strategies for Working with Literature Clients in a Writing Lab Consultation,” written by five former peer consultants. The article spoke directly to the tutors’ concerns, asking (and posing answers) to such frequently asked questions as “What do you do when the client says, ‘Is there some English major who can help me?’” or “‘On my last paper, my professor said I used too much plot summary. What’s that?’”

Afterwards, consultants wrote their reactions to the article: “very helpful,” “very explanatory,” and “interesting approaches to different types of clients.” In spite of the fact the consultants who wrote the article graduated years ago, their voices were heard even now, helping a new set of tutors trying to walk the same path travelled by the now invisible colleagues. And because the articles were written by former consultants, their voices carried an unimpeachable authority resonating with new tutors. (See Appendix for a list of articles.)

The invisible are made visible in another way. Always eager to help out, experienced consultants have created handouts to be used with clients. One of the most popular (with both clients and consultants alike) explains how to write effective titles; another provides help with “Conclusions: How to Wow Your Readers.” Besides these general rhetorical concerns, consultants have developed handouts for specific disciplines, such as “Writing a History Paper.” The lab, of course, could just download the many excellent examples of handouts found on other labs’ Web sites. However, not all plants grow in every soil. When veteran consultants create handouts, they call upon their

experiences in what our clients think about, worry about, and ask about; then, the veteran consultants produce handouts offering assistance to these fledgling writers. In our lab’s now burgeoning files, these handouts reside . . . waiting for when a novice consultant needs to pull them in order to have a more successful consultation. In a sense, I think of this file cabinet as the “voice drawer,” holding the ideas and concerns of former consultants.

To forestall even more of the experienced consultants’ knowledge from escaping out the lab door, I have asked departing consultants to write an “Advice to the Future.” The advice can cover any aspect of their work, with the choices left entirely to the consultants. This advice is, then, placed in a notebook available for all tutors to read. After all, departing consultants know what are the hardest parts of their jobs, what are the most demanding aspects, and what other consultants should know in order to be successful.

New consultants sitting in the lab awaiting clients open up the Advice Notebook to read some of the thirty or more essays offering words of wisdom about a wide range of topics, such as how to survive as a consultant: “Take care of yourself; you cannot help others if you cannot help yourself” (Julie Bennett). Other advice stresses the benefits of working in the lab: “Learn as much as you can about your own writing process from the writer you help. . . . Use the knowledge you gain from the consultation to enhance your own writing and show your clients how much fun reworking a sentence or analysing a poem can be” (Laurel Marling). And some of the comments provide useful tips for successful consultations, such as “The more excited you are about their papers, the more your clients will be willing to work hard” (Susan Burr). Written in tutor talk, these time capsules of advice are vibrant, personal ways to keep the voices of graduated consultants ever present in the lab.

In asking consultants to write articles, create handouts, and compose advice to the future, I was, of course, training the tutors. But, they, in turn, became the trainers, leaving behind something of their own experiences. So, in the spring, in addition to Keats, lab directors should be reminded of H. G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man*—or in this case—the invisible men (and women) who have worked in a writing lab. The invisible can become visible, continuing the training and creating a smooth transition between generations of consultants.

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College of Charleston  
Charleston, SC

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#### Appendix: Consultants’ Articles Used for Training

Burr, Susan, Jason Chan, Joshua Farrar, Mary-Jane Ogawa, and Bonnie Devet. “International Students and the Writing Lab.” *Writing Lab Newsletter* 22.3 (1997): 1-4.

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Hornsby, Chris, Laurel G. Marling, Dennis Maxwell, Melinda Rose, Melissa Tidwell, and Bonnie Devet. “‘Is This an ‘A’ Paper?’: Strategies for Working with Literature Clients in a Writing Lab Consultation.” *Writing Lab Newsletter* 24.9 (2000): 14-16.

Ogawa, Mary-Jane. “Making the Oral Journey: The Talk Between Writing Lab Consultants and Clients.” *Southern Discourse* 2.2 (1999): 6.

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# “Go to the writing center”: The writing center’s growing authority in a science and engineering university

In our small science and engineering state university, writing has historically taken a back seat to math, chemistry, and physics. When the Writing Center at New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology was established six years ago, its visibility was minimal and student usage was low. By using public relations techniques suggested in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and other sources, the NMT Writing Center’s reputation has grown. The Center has, incrementally, developed its own ethos of trustworthy assistance for writers at all levels.

How does one begin to create an ethos of authority in matters of writing? I was hired to establish and direct the Writing Center at NMT in 1995, with a few years of graduate school writing center experience (and a lot of enthusiasm). I transformed an empty office into the writing center (two desks, a dictionary, and some pencils), I recruited a staff of peer tutors (volunteers), used guilt to coerce a few of my new humanities colleagues to volunteer some extra hours, and I hung up a bunch of flyers. All the while, I pondered the deeper question of how I could gain the respect of students and faculty alike.

As Elizabeth Bouquet writes, “The respect, security, and stability of the WC must come first, and it is well documented how hard-won these are. But it is only by virtue of gaining respect that we stand a chance . . . of maintaining the critical space (literally and figuratively) that our writing centers would do well to occupy” (7). I fully recognized this challenge as I set out to establish my credibility as a writing center director. I also recognized that I couldn’t “go it alone.” Al DeCiccio expresses my sentiments when he states, “We negotiate and compromise; we speak the language of the academy as well as of the student; we build alliances; we acquire respect from multiple constituencies” (4).

## **Helpful and dedicated colleague ethos: Writing center lady to save the day**

The first step to establishing credibility was establishing myself as “the writing center lady.” I tried an “in-your-face” approach of making Writing Center announcements at the monthly faculty meetings. I wanted to make sure that every faculty member knew that there was a writing center on campus, and I was the main connection. This raises another point about figuring out the best way to communicate with one’s colleagues. In a science and engineering university, faculty and students alike speak the language of calculus and computers, but (and I say this with full respect) they sometimes lack the social graces required for successful interpersonal communication. Therefore, I went double-duty to reach out to faculty. I visited their classrooms and labs to talk about the Writing Center. And I listened to them talk about their concerns about their students’ writing.

## **Empathetic and knowledgeable colleague ethos: Tell me where it hurts**

To gain faculty respect, I had to prove I understood their concerns and could act on them. In addition to offering to speak to their classes, I also sent out an informal faculty survey, “What Are Your Pet Peeves About Student Writing?” (Nye). I learned a few things from the survey responses. First, I learned specific writing problems to focus on with Writing Center clients. Second, I began to understand the attitude of professors, as well as their approach to helping their students. Third and perhaps most importantly, I began to identify the professors who cared deeply about writing. Six years later I still call on these advocates to support me on Writing Center issues.

## **Accessible professor ethos: The writing center is here to serve you**

As I surveyed the faculty, I also surveyed the students. I devised a questionnaire to learn about their writing problems, their writing habits, and their needs in a writing center. I administered the questionnaire in the most visible place on campus (the Student Union Building) at the busiest hour (lunch), with the most delectable incentive (chocolate). Responses weren’t all that surprising (students said they needed help with English classes, with grammar, with resumes, and so on), but it was important to document needs as a reference point for my work as Writing Center director. I think the most important outcome was the Writing Center Lady to Save the Day effect again: hundreds of students saw me, and by association saw the Writing Center. I made sure that I came across as concerned and accessible. Although it is tempting, “we cannot stay in the Writing Center . . . where it is safe and comfortable,” writes Sally Crisp (4). It is essential to “venture out,” even (especially) if the attitude towards writing is not hospitable.

## **Community ethos: A literate university**

In the Writing Center’s second year I tried to venture out even more. I continued all the “ethos building” strategies of year one, and I tried to introduce a few new strategies to convey the idea that NM Tech supports and encourages reading as well as writing. Again I polled the faculty, this time with a program I called, “What Tech Reads.” I asked faculty for recommendations of their favorite fiction and non-fiction works. I typed their responses and made an attractive display on our library’s main bulletin board, which I changed once a month for a few months. I thought it was important that the students saw that their profes-

sors read “fun stuff” and not just science journals. I also started the annual Writing Center Creative Writing Contest, a tradition we have continued for the past four years. This event seems to draw writers out of the woodwork. We have received so much poetry that we had to enlist a six-page per author entry limit. We reward the winners with gift certificates from around town and publication in our school paper. Last year we also tried publishing winners in an on-line literary “zine.”

### The effects of this multi-faceted ethos

While the Writing Center is still under-utilized, I believe attitudes and values about writing have changed for the better throughout my six years at New Mexico Tech. Most students know about the Writing Center (although probably less than half have actually used it). Their professors know about it and encourage students to get help. Several years ago I appealed to the administration and received a small budget to hire tutors. I continue to flood the campus with publicity to draw in more students. And I continue to look for more ways to reach out and serve the larger campus community.

Last fall the Dean of the Graduate School approached me with questions about the quality of graduate student writing. We conducted a meeting of graduate faculty to learn more about their perceptions and desires for their graduate students. As a result, I designed a series of writing workshops for graduate students, which I am conducting this spring (my department chair gave me a

course reduction to undertake this project). The response has been excellent, especially from faculty who hope their students will attend the series and become better writers.

### Conclusions

While I don't think there is a specific formula for how to grow a writing center and develop an ethos of authority, here is a summary of strategies that worked for my university.

- *Know your audience.* Know that you are dealing with multiple audiences: What do students need? What does faculty need? What does your university need? To analyze your audience, you may use a number of techniques including surveys, focus groups, and informal conversation.
- *Identify your resources.* By this I mean not just budgetary constraints, but also a realistic assessment of your time and energy, as well as that of your colleagues and students. In my case, I have identified four areas for the Writing Center to offer: One-to-one peer tutoring; a resource for questions on grammar and usage (small check-out library, plus tutors provide information and handouts); annual writing contest; graduate student writing program.
- *Publicize cleverly.* This goes back to knowing your audience. What publicity seems to work at your institution? Flyers? Chalking side-walks? Speaking to classes? Every school is different.

Perhaps the last point is the most important: Build alliances. Find faculty, staff, and administration to bolster the idea that writing is important at your university. Try to draw the university together—across disciplines—in your goal to improve writing. Such institutional support makes the words, “Go to the Writing Center,” a sweet triumph, not just for yourself as a director, but for the whole university.

Emily F. Nye

New Mexico Institute of Mining and  
Technology  
Socorro, NM

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## Northern California Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals

March 8, 2003

Monterey, CA

Keynote Speaker: Nancy Maloney Grimm

“*Cultivating the Center: Connecting Diverse Writing Communities*”

Submissions should fall into one of two categories: 60-minute or 90-minute presentations. Please include an abstract: 250 words maximum including the title, format (panel, roundtable discussion, or workshop), description of presentation and purpose, and a summary for the program: 50 words maximum including presentation title, names of presenters, job titles, and institution. To print out a proposal form see Web site: <<http://www.asap.csumb.edu/newca>>. Deadline: January 10, 2003. Contact: Natasha Oehlman, Chair. E-mail: [newca@csumb.edu](mailto:newca@csumb.edu); phone: (831) 582-4614.

## Northeast Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals  
April 5, 2003  
Nashua, NH  
*"Moving Forward and Looking Back: Writing  
Center Histories, Herstories, and Heresies"*  
Keynote speaker: Neal Lerner

We are interested in the way that histories—personal, public, and political—describe the work of WC's and tutors and wonder how those histories may influence our current philosophies and practices. More detailed questions to guide your proposal are available on the website. Proposals are due December 27th. The conference Web site is: <<http://web.bryant.edu/~ace/wrtctr/NEWCA.htm>>. An additional link to the conference Web site is available from the Rivier College homepage: <<http://www.rivier.edu>>.

## Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring in Writing

Call for Proposals  
April 11-12, 2003  
Ogden, UT  
*"Coaching Writers"*  
Keynote speaker: William Strong

Proposals on any topic related to writing center theory and practice are welcome. Deadline is February 15. Contact info: Sylvia Newman, 1107 University Circle, Ogden UT 84408. E-mail: [snewman@weber.edu](mailto:snewman@weber.edu).

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