

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E W T T E R

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

June, 2008

## – FROM THE EDITOR –

With this issue, we close this academic year's volume, and some superb reading awaits you when we return in September. In the meantime, keep sending your submissions via our Web site: <writinglab-newsletter.org>. Our associate editors, Janet Auten and Mike Mattison, will stay on the job all summer, handling the huge job of overseeing manuscript review. That means those of you reviewers who so generously spend time reading manuscripts will be reading and responding all summer too. Reviewers are clearly the unsung heroes of our scholarly work. They read, offer suggestions, interact with authors, read further drafts, and continue to put into practice the collaborative, supportive principles of our writing center world. They ensure that we read articles that offer us the best thinking and writing our authors are capable of.

In this issue, you'll find Matthew Ortoleva and Jeremiah Dyehouse's discussion of using the SWOT approach to plan effectively for your center's future. Mary Hemmelgarn guides tutors in how to use self-disclosure effectively, while Mary Murray McDonald's article on students with severe mental disorders helps us prepare for potentially difficult tutorials. Wesley Houpponders how writing center tutors can help students explore the paths they take in college. Finally, Lauren Kopec describes her quest to tread a middle ground between directive and non-directive questioning.

I wish us all a summer with an abundance of quality time to relax in a hammock, with a tall glass of iced tea. Whether you actually get out there or just climb into that hammock mentally, have a delightful summer.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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## SWOT ANALYSIS: AN INSTRUMENT FOR WRITING CENTER STRATEGIC PLANNING

◆ Matthew Ortoleva  
and Jeremiah Dyehouse  
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Writing centers' generally good reputations with students, faculties, and administrators can only do so much to attract critical resources, especially in under-funded state colleges and universities. Strategic planning can help to articulate needs and justify resource requests, addressing potential shortfalls in discretionary budgets, space, and technology. Good strategic planning, however, requires good grounding in the actual strengths and weaknesses of writing centers, their student writers, and their staffs. In other words, good strategic planning requires good instruments for writing center self-evaluation.

In their book, *Organizational Diagnosis and Assessment: Bridging Theory and Practice*, Michael Harrison and Arie Shirom suggest that one particularly useful approach to planning is SWOT analysis (20). SWOT is an acronym for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Common in business settings, SWOT analysis is a tool for organizational management that may be applied effectively to writing centers. SWOT analysis helps administrators understand stakeholder perceptions about the operational effectiveness of an organization by focusing on four related kinds of

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perceptions—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats—and interactions within these categories (21).

In this article, we briefly describe SWOT analysis, its application as an instrument for writing center planning, and our SWOT implementation for our northeastern land-grant university's writing center. Carried out by a Ph.D. candidate and writing center assistant director (Ortoleva), and a tenure-line writing center director (Dyehouse), our analysis coordinated assessments given by writing center stakeholders, including past writing center directors, tutors, writing faculty, a student writer, and an academic support administrator. Our SWOT analysis eventually led to a three-year strategic plan for our writing center.

Too often writing centers are considered merely as spaces for individual writing tutors to do their work with student writers. In actuality, writing centers are dynamic, multifaceted, "ecological" institutions. When we consider a writing center not as a space for a collection of individuals with individual tasks, but rather as a complex, synergetic organization of people, tasks, and purposes, we can employ more effective approaches to developing organizational understanding. With this more dynamic view of writing centers, we can consider applying business and organizational models and tools of analysis to better understand how our writing centers function as productive spaces for stakeholders. As Brenda Moore suggests, there are enough similarities between profit and non-profit organizations that assessment and planning tools are readily shared and applicable to both (50). We should not be afraid to adapt tools developed in business settings to our (admittedly very different) writing center organizations.

SWOT analysis, as one such tool, generates a profile of an organization based on the organization's internal attributes (strengths and weaknesses) and its external environment (opportunities and threats). Subjective by design, a SWOT analysis offers a profile of stakeholders' perceptions of an organization. In other words, for writing centers, a SWOT analysis offers a momentary snapshot of an organization through the eyes of stakeholders who believe in, work closely with, or rely on our writing centers.

The subjective quality of the data SWOT instruments generate is important, since, as with stakeholders' perceptions, there are no "wrong" answers in a SWOT analysis. Writing centers organize social cooperation, and perceptions—especially committed stakeholders' perceptions—affect a writing center's capacity to do so effectively. Moreover, even seemingly conflicted perceptions of a writing center may indicate stakeholders' differing investments in the organization. In our SWOT analysis, for instance, stakeholders categorized "*tutors are primarily English graduate students*" as both a strength and a weakness. Such diametrical categorization may at first seem counter-productive, but upon careful consideration can reveal important points. In our case, the different perceptions revealed a potential drawback to not having tutors from other disciplines tutoring in our writing center and made us consider how other segments of the university community, such as engineering and science students, may view the center.

A SWOT analysis should work for a writing center in much the same way as it does for any other organization. For a SWOT analysis to yield the most complete profile, data collection techniques must be considered, and a representative range of stakeholders must be consulted, and their input analyzed. Tapping into a range of stakeholders and their perceptions is the key to a productive SWOT analysis, and a good place to start is with a full accounting of all stakeholders in the university community. Some examples of stakeholders that comprise the university community are administrators, tutors, faculty, and, of course, students. It may be difficult to gain access to all these stakeholders, and in our case, time constraints played a part in determining which stakeholders we would approach and what data collection methods we would use.<sup>1</sup> However, the broader the range of stakeholders included in a SWOT analysis, the richer the data. Broadening the range of stakeholders included also decreases the chance of misinterpretations or overzealous interpretations, which can hinder the strategic planning process.<sup>2</sup>

Two common data collection techniques for SWOT analysis are surveys and interviews. Both methods have their merits. Surveys can be distributed to a wider range and greater number of stakeholders, and

questions can be limited, allowing for focused responses. Surveys, however, may be difficult to collect, and response numbers are often disappointing. Interviews offer a rich and deep data source that can generate new avenues of response, such as new ideas for planning, immediate solutions to minor problems, or a new direction of inquiry for the interview in-progress. Interviews are, however, labor intensive and can burden a small staff. The most appropriate data collection method for a SWOT analysis of a writing center is best determined based on available stakeholders and resources, and the potential knowledge that a method will yield. Developing SWOT analysis as an instrument for use in writing centers, that is, demands attention to what the analysis can accomplish in local circumstances.

As part of developing a new strategic plan for a new writing center administration, our own writing center conducted a SWOT analysis in the fall of 2006 to inform strategic planning for the following spring. During the planning stages of the SWOT, we determined that stakeholders would be interviewed so as to generate more data, as well as allow us to solicit other types of input when necessary. By using interviews, we were able to generate discussion on issues of long-term strategic planning significance as well as on smaller or surface issues needing immediate attention.<sup>3</sup> Because of the time necessary to conduct interviews, we decided that the number of interviews would be limited. As a result, a total of eleven stakeholders participated in our SWOT analysis: two current tutors; two past center directors; one additional member of the Writing and Rhetoric faculty; the director of the Academic Enhancement Center (a center with a common goal and strong relationship to the writing center); the center's current director and assistant director; and one student who frequently uses the center. After all interviews were complete, responses were analyzed for similarities and themes. Common responses given were the following: well-trained and knowledgeable staff (strength), responsive to students (strength), limited space for tutoring (weakness), lack of some cross-cultural competencies (weakness), success and expansion of the Writing and Rhetoric program (opportunity), intensified partnership with Academic Enhancement Center (opportunity), unplanned expansion of ESL tutoring (threat), and students and faculty don't know what we do (threat).

In our case, the results of the SWOT analysis were interpreted and presented to the faculty of the College Writing Program and Writing Center tutors as follows:

This institutional evaluation suggests a number of challenges and opportunities for short- and long-term planning. In the short term, staff training can improve the staff's skills in cross-cultural communication and in other areas. Long-term planning, however, will be needed to address the other, more serious weaknesses and threats identified in the evaluation. Addressing problems with space, technology, basic staff expertise, or students' and faculty members' perceptions of the center, for instance, will require strategies planned and implemented over time. Identifying which of these problems to address—and which strengths to preserve and which opportunities to exploit—will be the main goal of our upcoming strategic plan.

It may appear, upon reviewing these results, that the SWOT analysis yielded little new information. Indeed, the above analysis might apply to many, perhaps most, writing centers in this country. However, even given an expected result, the practice of SWOT analysis is beneficial for two important reasons. First, SWOT analysis invites and includes perspectives from a variety of stakeholders. All writing centers have what Stephen North might consider "lore." That is, all writing centers have a body of pragmatic knowledge created from "traditions, practices and beliefs" and are "best understood as being organized within an experienced-based framework" (23). However, writing center lore is created from the inside, often without the voices of those who have a stake in the decisions of the center but are not considered a part of it. A SWOT analysis may either confirm or challenge the lore of a center. In any case, it explicitly seeks to broaden admin-

*“ We should not be afraid to adapt tools developed in business settings to our (admittedly very different) writing center organizations. ”*

3. Our use of open and dialogic interviews allowed the stakeholders, in large part, to guide the conversation. Occasionally, this led to discussions about issues that fell outside concerns of long-term planning, and could be addressed immediately or in the short term. Examples of such issues might be asking the front desk workers to make sure students filled out the informational “blue cards” when arriving, or to ensure there were enough pads and pens available to tutors. Such issues, of course, are the important day-to-day concerns of writing center tutors.

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istrators’ understandings of stakeholders’ multiple perspectives. Second, SWOT analysis creates and articulates a codified version of a body of knowledge, documented and offered for critical reflection and goal-setting possibilities. Once documented, stakeholders’ perspectives do more than merely aid administrators’ understanding; they also become key resources for mapping possible futures.

It is worth offering a special cautionary note on using SWOT analysis. It is especially important to consider all categories (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) equally and to analyze carefully the interactions amongst the categories. It becomes easy to focus on the strengths and celebrate what is working well at a writing center, and there is certainly a time for such celebration. However, the ultimate point of a SWOT analysis is to identify and build upon strengths, minimize the impact of weakness, best exploit opportunities and, of critical importance, address threats. Pride and Ferrell point out that “threats must be acted upon to prevent them from limiting the capabilities of an organization” (43). As previously mentioned, a SWOT analysis is a subjective, perception-based analysis. However, SWOT does offer a broad perceptual snapshot of an organization, and it is in such a snapshot that SWOT shows its real strength as an analytical tool. SWOT offers a systematic approach to understanding the operational environment of a writing center.

The twenty-first century writing center can no longer afford to operate under the clinical or fix-it models that guided most planning in the past. The synergetic ethos of today’s writing center calls for administrators to have a better sense of organizational dynamics, including approaches to planning. An acknowledgment and understanding of such dynamics will not only better serve our students and create sustainable writing centers, but also model the kinds of organizations in which our students may find themselves working in their futures. However, in light of its history of employment in business contexts, using SWOT analysis for strategic planning can seem to conflict with writing centers’ common emphasis on administration as collaborative problem-solving. By codifying stakeholders’ statements, by counting them, and by circulating them as indices of centers’ needs, there seems some risk of losing what is inventive and immediate in the open-ended conversations that writing centers are built on. Yet, writing center administrators can have it both ways: we can have our open-ended conversations (including conversations about strategic planning), and we can share the results of more directed inquiry with others. Our organizational planning tools must help us manage the real complexity of working within multifaceted institutions. We should seek out a diverse array of tools for strategic planning, and wherever we find good tools for engaging such a process, we should adapt them for our use. SWOT analysis provides one such adaptation for writing centers. ♦

#### Notes

1. Several factors contributed to the time pressures we faced while deciding how to conduct our SWOT analysis. First, little planning had been completed the previous year. At the same time, the College Writing Program was experiencing growth, adding tenure-track faculty and implementing a new Writing and Rhetoric major. With the growth of the College Writing Program and a new, full-time tenure track faculty member taking the helm of the writing center, it was clear that there was an overdue need to set a new direction for the center. Our administration set as a goal the development of a new strategic plan by the end of the academic year. Faced with adapting to the new administrative position, the day-to-day and beginning- and end-of-the-semester challenges, and the need for critical self-assessment before planning, we decided on a six- to eight-week plan for our SWOT analysis.

2. The subjective nature of a SWOT analysis, and all qualitative approaches, would question whether a “misinterpretation” is possible. However, for purposes of strategic planning, misinterpretation or overzealous interpretation may be interpretations that ignore the purpose of a SWOT and hinder, rather than aid, the strategic planning process. For a discussion on the potential drawbacks of using a SWOT analysis, and for strategies to avoid potential misinterpretations of data, see Balamuralikrishna and Dugger, “SWOT Analysis: A Management Tool for Initiating New Programs in Vocational Schools.”

*(Notes and Works Cited are continued in the margin to the left.)*



## USING SELF-DISCLOSURE AS PART OF YOUR TUTORING STRATEGY

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As tutors, we want our tutees to interact with us during their tutoring sessions. In tutor training, we talk about how to ask questions and give feedback in order to increase interaction. Both of these strategies represent good ways to encourage tutee participation, but what else can we do? Research supports that engaging in tutor self-disclosure might be another way to increase interaction in a tutoring session. Paul Cozby defines self-disclosure as a person's sharing of personal and professional information about himself or herself in a believable way. These statements reveal information about the person that others are unlikely to learn from other sources and may or may not be related to subject content. Jacob Cayanus asserts that self-disclosure is one area of teaching that is often overlooked, even though it can serve as a powerful tool in the classroom when used appropriately. The research in this article specifically addresses teacher self-disclosure in a teacher-student relationship; however, it can be applied to a tutor-tutee relationship as well. The research shows that self-disclosure might affect how tutees classify us as being good or poor tutors in addition to how they interact with us. The purpose of this article is to review existing studies on self-disclosure and show how tutors can use self-disclosure effectively.

Research demonstrates that self-disclosure can have an impact on tutees viewing us as being "good" or "bad" tutors. Sorenson's study shows not only that students make judgments about what good and poor teachers say, but also that what teachers verbalize will determine how students perceive them. In the study, students categorize disclosures associated with "good" teachers as statements that are positively worded and show care or concern. Students link disclosures that are negatively worded and demonstrate a lack of caring with "poor" teachers. Applying this to a tutoring context, tutors should engage in positive self-disclosures (e.g., "I think this is a great assignment to help you understand a different form of writing") and avoid negative self-disclosures (e.g., "I don't like teachers who don't have bulleted assignment sheets").

Research also demonstrates that self-disclosure can affect tutor-tutee interaction. This is largely attributed to the reciprocity effect, one of the most reliable phenomena found in the self-disclosure literature (McAllister; Bregman and Cozby). The reciprocity effect states that self-disclosure by one person will trigger self-disclosure from another. After a person receives an intimate or non-intimate disclosure, it is highly likely that the person will respond by reciprocating with the same amount, topic, and even intimacy level of the original disclosure (Omarzu; McAllister and Bregman). These studies indicate that teacher self-disclosure creates an open interpersonal context in which the students feel comfortable interacting. These results suggest that a tutor can use self-disclosure to help reduce some of the tutee's anxiety, and help him or her feel more comfortable engaging in dialogue with the tutor.

So how should tutors go about engaging in self-disclosure effectively? Tutors can use the following suggestions to guide their self-disclosures.

### ENGAGE IN POSITIVE SELF-DISCLOSURE

As mentioned earlier, tutors who engage in positive self-disclosure will increase their likelihood of being viewed favorably by their tutees. Positive self-disclosure can result in students viewing the teacher as "friendly and warm, which in turn helps create a positive learning environment" (Cayanus 8). I think that tutors sometimes feel that making comments like "Yeah, I hated English 101, too" will help strengthen the rapport with the tutee; however, in reality, these types of self-disclosures focus atten-



### WRITING CENTER RESEARCH PROJECT

The Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) will circulate its fifth biannual survey on writing centers in late August 2008. The WCRP survey establishes benchmark information for writing centers; accurate information will depend on your generosity in providing information. Please watch for and complete this year's survey. If you are a writing center director and have not received the survey by the end of August, please go to the WCRP Web site <<http://coldfusion.louisville.edu/webs/a-s/wcrp/>> to complete the survey. If you receive the request and are no longer a writing center director, we ask that you forward the survey request to the appropriate person. Questions may be addressed to Carol Mattingly (502) 852-3055 or [carol.mattingly@louisville.edu](mailto:carol.mattingly@louisville.edu).



### INTERNATIONAL WRITING CENTERS WEEK

International Writing Centers Week is generally the week in February that includes Feb. 14. For 2009 that is Sunday, February 8, through Saturday, February 14. The rule is pretty simple: IWCA week is always the week that includes February 14. For calculation purposes, the week is considered to start on Sunday. In 2010, Feb 14 is a Sunday, so IWCA week will be Feb 14-20.

Clint Gardner  
(former chair of the IWCA Week Committee and Past-President of IWCA)

# NEWS

## Secondary School Writing Center Wiki

Please forward this message to any secondary school writing center directors you know! We are in the process of creating a new resource created by secondary writing school directors and geared specifically to them. Please join the new Secondary School Writing Center "wiki":<<http://secondarywritingcenters.wikispaces.com/>>.

This wiki is a collaborative Web site that serves as central place for us to post notices and share resources. Additionally, it gives us the opportunity to create the writing center directory that so many of us have been looking for. We know there are other secondary writing center directors out there—but who are they and where are they? Once at the site, you can request to "join" the site, and I can grant you access to the site. Once your access is granted, you may modify the site by adding links, etc. Please be sure to add your contact information to the directory listing—it doesn't automatically happen. Press the "edit page" button to update the page. Be sure to save any changes you make.

Discussion Option: We can carry on discussion threads at this site. You can set up a feed so that you get notified when new posts are made (if you'd like). Why is there a Chicagoland Link? The Secondary Site was created as a result of our most recent meeting of the Chicagoland Organization of Writing Centers. If you have a group of writing centers in your area, you might want to post a link that group's site.

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tion on negative feelings and might provoke the tutee to use the tutor's self-disclosure to justify his or her dislike of the course. Instead, a more effective tutor self-disclosure might be, "Yeah, I struggled a little with English 101, but I ended up doing well and learning a lot, so it was worth it in the end." This not only keeps the session upbeat, but allows the tutee to see that the course content does not come easy, even to those who appear to have an excellent grasp on the material. This tutor disclosure also illustrates that the tutee must put forth that extra effort in order to achieve good results. I have often used this strategy, with great success, to motivate tutees.

## ENGAGE IN SELF-DISCLOSURE RELEVANT TO THE MATERIAL AND BE AWARE OF THE NUMBER OF TIMES YOU SELF-DISCLOSE

Relevant self-disclosure is shown not only to increase student motivation, but also to increase student interest in the material (Cayanus; Goldstein and Benassi); however, even if the self-disclosures are relevant and positive, too much self-disclosure might take away from learning. The amount of self-disclosure is important to keep in mind. After all, the tutoring session is not about you, it is about the tutee's learning. If you start to find that you are self-disclosing frequently, you might want to stop to ask why. Are you giving too much personal insight about the actual content of the assignment, thereby taking away from critical thinking skills of the tutee? For example, during a session a tutee was crafting an outline of main points on the topic of why music is important. The tutee was having a hard time coming up with her arguments and asked me, "Why is music important to you?" I responded with "Well, this essay isn't about why it is important to me, but why it is important to you. So let's talk. Why is music important to you?" After the tutee talked through the question, she came up with the main point that music is good for stress reduction. I stated that I agreed with this point. Instead of using self-disclosure to do her thinking for her, I used it to positively reinforce her own thinking. I have also had tutees ask me questions, such as "What would you say here?" and "How would you answer this question?" Tutors should pause and carefully structure an answer before disclosing too much information. It is tempting to rattle off ideas for how *we* would word the sentence, but, again, we are there to help tutees structure their own sentences. I find that giving tutees enough time to think about what they want to say and asking them questions like "What do you want the reader to take away from this paragraph?" is a good strategy to avoid disclosing too much of my own opinion.

## VARY THE TOPICS OF YOUR SELF-DISCLOSURES

The research indicates that students will get weary if all self-disclosures are on the same topic. If you find all of your self-disclosures begin with "I remember when I was in English 101," it may cause your self-disclosures to lose their effect. This is especially a concern with tutees who meet with you frequently. Try to self-disclose in multiple areas related to the content. If you do refer to papers you wrote for a specific class, you might consider referring to the type of paper rather than the class. For example, you could say, "When I was writing a literature review on global warming, I also struggled with synthesis," instead of "When I was in English 101, we had to write a literature review. . . ." The purpose of keeping the scope of the self-disclosures broad is three-fold. First, the tutee will see the need to acquire writing skills outside of simply meeting the requirements for a class. Second, you as the tutor will think on a broader level and not limit yourself to examples related to the particular course you are tutoring. It is important that we as tutors use examples that show our development as writers. Third, the tutees will hopefully be more likely to expose themselves to the disclosure. I once had a business class in which the instructor had some great work experiences; however, she began each story with "When I was at Smith Company. . . ." Even though the stories did a good job illustrating important course concepts, students were quick to roll eyes and tune out as soon as she mentioned the company's name. Research supports that if she would have varied the introductions of the disclosures, students would have been more receptive. For example, she could have started with "When I was in a meeting" or "When I was working on a project dealing with x" to relate to different types of work experiences. We can do the same when relaying our writing experiences.

## PAY ATTENTION TO THE TIMING OF YOUR SELF-DISCLOSURES

Ask yourself: Does the self-disclosure make sense given where you are in the session, or would it be distracting? If your tutee is engaged in the session already, a personal story or opinion might take the focus off learning. I find that the best time to self-disclose is at the beginning or end of a session to help students feel comfortable about the session. For example, a student recently struggled through a session on writing a literature review. At the end of the session I said, "Writing a literature review is tough. It is something that many students struggle with because it is a different type of assignment. When I was confronted with my first literature review assignment in graduate school, I felt overwhelmed. I truly had no idea where to start, so I understand how you are feeling. But I got through it. It was definitely not easy, but it shows that with hard work you can get through this, too!" I could see the tutee's tension ease after my self-disclosure.

While using self-disclosure can be highly effective, it is important to recognize that self-disclosure could pose some challenges for tutors. Disclosures could jeopardize the tutor/tutee relationship by making the session awkward or by reducing the distance between tutor and tutee. Research supports that if a person divulges what is perceived as an intimate disclosure, the disclosure might cause the relationship to dissolve or even diminish (Altman). I observed a tutor engaged in a session in which the tutee disclosed heavy details about a current relationship. I could tell this made the tutor nervous. The tutor responded by disclosing that he had just gone through a break-up. After these disclosures, the tutoring session became awkward and ended early. If a tutor finds himself in this situation, one way to handle it would be to turn the attention back to the tutoring session and not reciprocate the tutee's self-disclosure. Instead of disclosing your own relationship stories, you could say, "Yes, relationships can be complicated, which is the point the author is making. Let's look at the second paragraph."

One might ask why the tutee would feel comfortable disclosing details about a relationship. One reason could be that the tutee perceives little distance between herself and the tutor. The concern that tutor self-disclosure might shorten the distance between tutor and tutee should also be recognized. Depending on the situation, this shortened distance can be good or bad. For example, if you are a graduate student or an instructor and you are tutoring undergraduates, self-disclosure can be a way to break down the power barrier, making the tutee more comfortable around you. Conversely, if you are tutoring an undergraduate student and you yourself are an undergraduate student, self-disclosure could make the distance too short. When I was tutoring last semester, I was a graduate student and a public speaking instructor. I found that this made some of the undergraduate tutees nervous, so I would say, "I know what it is like to feel overwhelmed with an assignment." On the other hand, I also had tutoring sessions with other graduate students who I could tell were a little apprehensive about my advice. I made it a point to disclose that I was a public speaking instructor in order to establish my credibility. I found that the disclosure increased the tutees' trust in my advice. In conclusion, when using self-disclosure as part of your tutoring strategy, remember to engage in disclosures that are positive and relevant. Also, be aware of the timing, the topic, and the number of times you engage in self-disclosure. When used correctly, tutor self-disclosure represents another tool that we can put into our tutoring toolboxes! ♦

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## ASSESSING AND RESPONDING TO CLIENTS WITH SEVERE MENTAL DISORDERS

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Over the past three to four years, there has been a significant increase in the number of very challenging students seeking help in the Writing Center of our urban, open-admissions university. The students we have encountered ranged from one who talked into his shirt as if it were a microphone, to one who hired a gunman to injure her family (she stated in a newspaper article that she did not want them killed, since she loved them), to another who later went on a shooting rampage at a local university, killing a young MBA student and wounding several others. None of these students were violent in the Writing Center; however, in each of the cases I will briefly discuss, each client was identified as having a severe mental disorder by which I mean a disorder that puts the client out of touch with reality, like schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders. I spent much time talking with a counselor about these clients and decided to develop strategies using his advice, readings on these disorders, and our own observations. Even though I will suggest that tutors refer such clients to work with the director of their writing center, I hope with this article to make that first tutorial less taxing and more productive for both client and tutor.

### RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF A CLIENT WITH A SEVERE MENTAL DISORDER

#### *Taking Note of Appearance*

A stain on the clothes from lunch is nothing unusual, and a bad hair day is known to most of us, but one of the first clues that a student may have some severe mental difficulties that impact his or her ability to have a productive writing tutorial session is hygiene and overall appearance. While fashion and style can vary vastly on a campus, cleanliness, appropriateness, and good grooming are fundamental clues to how well a client is doing generally. The clothing of the difficult clients we saw had long-embedded stains and tended to be inappropriate for the season. During an incredibly cold winter one student wore white pants and another wore a light raincoat. One student had an overflowing purse that spewed Kleenex onto the floor every time she attempted to find anything in it. Most had their hair askew beyond any bad hair day. We usually dismiss these small details, but they are important first clues that a client may be experiencing difficulties that will impact an initial session.

#### *The Need to Frequently Refocus the Student*

If the tutor encounters the situation where the student frequently shifts from one topic to the next and seems unable to focus on a single task that he or she would like to work on, this fragmentation may be symptomatic of a difficult session. The tutor may begin to feel some futility or exasperation with the student and about what can be accomplished in this first session. In my experience, attention will shift from one assignment to another, from major to minor issues within a given assignment, and to criticizing the instructor and the assignment. The tutor has to expend a great deal of effort to get the client back on task and experiences limited success with this effort. While this description and others that are given may reflect a student with academic weaknesses, it is the extent and pervasiveness of this and other symptoms that distinguish the client with severe mental disorders.

#### *Emotional Reactivity*

Most of the students who seek help through the writing center express a wide range of emotions when they talk about and work on their assignments. By comparison, clients with a severe mental disorder often present with flat affect (are unexpressive) or present with excessive emotionality that seems not to fit the situations they are addressing. Sometimes the voice tone will vary from very high or low and back to normal. Of all the signs I will describe, the flat affect is the most disturbing to me; when a student displays it, I can't get an accurate sense of how the student feels about the assignment or the writing itself. The times I've questioned clients in an attempt to connect feeling with the assignment, the client has responded by looking away or by avoiding a response that reflects how he or she feels.

#### *The Need to Be Right*

Usually a professor has referred the student to a writing center because the content of the paper is either terribly wrong or very inappropriate. When the tutor suggests some revisions, however, the client launches into long defenses of why the text looks like it does. One student even insulted staff members to have them quit giving suggestions. She accepted only one kind of improvement: moving sentences in the text. She could still be right that way.



## OUR RESPONSES

### *Have a Code Word*

If your staff creates a code word or sentence, it can be used to signal others to stay nearby when a tutor perceives a client as frightening or challenging. There are no Chinese food restaurants near our campus, so our code sentence is “Are you going for Chinese food?” When tutors hear that, they will stay nearby or even become involved in the tutorial.

### *Adopt a Soft Tone of Voice*

Once I see the initial cues of dress and voice tone, I quickly adopt a soft tone of voice because I suspect that the client will begin to defend his or her work. I limit my suggestions for revisions to three; if after three times the client resists or defends, I switch to the suggestions below. I have seen tutors become so exasperated with these clients that they raise their voices, and the clients quickly raise their voices too.

### *Make Your Feelings Your Allies*

If the client refuses suggestions, defends the text, and does not connect at all with the assignment, it's normal for the tutor to feel frustrated, angry, or offended. I imagine myself pulling my emotions to my side as a buddy who carries a sign about my values. When a client defends his text and will not listen to any tutor's suggestions, I pull my emotions to my side and label my own values. I identify my emotion as that of marveling: who wouldn't want to learn new strategies, I wonder. I must have a high value on learning new things. Once I identify my value(s), I won't disregard it and I won't repress it. Expressing even mild irritation with the client can cut short any learning on the client's part; repressing it will take its toll in exhaustion after the tutorial is over. I can then concentrate on respecting the client's wishes for that tutorial.

Most readers know that we can respond to blaming and excuses with statements like the following that in no way reveal our feelings or involve us in the professor bashing or excuse making: “That sounds so frustrating,” or “I think most people would feel that way.” The most challenging part of working with clients with severe mental disorders is responding to their need to be right by identifying what is right and building on it. I know most tutors do this in most tutorials, but the usual skills for tutorials don't work here. We must constantly work on the basis of what is right. This adaptation takes considerable effort because we are so used to tutorials where a student wants to learn and grows in responsibility. This client will not acknowledge what is wrong and needs to be fixed. In this first tutorial, it would be best for the tutor to keep showing the client what is right (at both the syntactic level and the overall response to the assignment) and in a very low-key manner to ask questions of the client regarding what the professor wants. The client may be frustrated at the end of the tutorial that not enough has been done—even though we don't know what that is and most of these clients do not want the tutor to write the paper for them. In other words, after half an hour, the client won't move a word on that text and the tutor has ideally still been a welcoming, respectful, and emotionally intelligent guide to writing.

### *Refer the Client to the Director*

The tutor should refer the client to work exclusively with the director, and the director needs to make a clear plan to rotate this client among tutors when the director is not available. The director can contact the professor (if there is one) and work closely with him or her to be sure that the student is making the progress the professor stipulates. The director can request models of student writing and magazine or journal articles from the professor that display good writing for this course. The professors I've dealt with have been very clear and direct about what they want as well as about grades and drop dates. This clarity makes tutoring much easier. When working with such clients, I offer them an hour of tutoring because they do not work well under a half-hour system.

The director can also work closely with a member of the counseling staff, recounting various snags in tutorials for suggestions. The director can also read materials about these illnesses to assure him- or herself that these clients are not violent or dangerous in this setting and try to understand as much as possible about various mental states. Understanding the limitations some clients face with memory, distractions, and concentration helps us grow in patience. Some readings are suggested at the end of this article. Taking courses in counseling can be an effective way to learn more about mental disorders in general and about specific language strategies to use while tutoring. It's important to provide excellent service to difficult clients while protecting the writing center staff from undue strain. While our hospitality to all students has been, like that of most writing centers, perhaps the most important part of our service, being hospitable to these types of clients requires special skills. ♦

*(See page 16 for Further Reading list.)*

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Writing Center Director Sweet Briar College

Sweet Briar College, a private, women's liberal arts and sciences college located in central Virginia, seeks a Writing Center Director for the College's Academic Resource Center. The Writing Center Director will work as a member of the Academic Resource Center team, which includes a Coordinator, a Writing Specialist, and a cadre of student peer-writing tutors. The responsibilities of the Writing Center Director will be to provide and preserve a sense of direction for the Center, to teach one course for the writing tutors and up to three courses in composition per year in the English Department, to prepare materials needed in the Center, to consult with Center staff and with faculty on writing instruction, to participate in the selection of writing tutors, to provide training, supervision and regular evaluation of writing tutors, to work with faculty in writing-across-the-curriculum programs, to provide for regular reports on the activities and progress of the Center, and to participate in regular and thorough evaluation of the Center's operations.

Essential preparation for the Writing Center director should include experience in teaching composition and rhetoric, knowledge of theories of learning and research and evaluation methods, and experience in developing and evaluating instructional materials. Ph.D. preferred, M.A. required.

The position will be effective as of August 1, 2008, and is full-time. EOE

Please contact Dr. Jill Granger for more information: Box D, Sweet Briar, VA 24574 (434) 381-6205, granger@sbcc.edu.

## THE WRITING CENTER AS COMPASS: RE-ORIENTING THE FRESHMAN TRAVELER

◆ Wesley Houpp  
Union College  
Barbourville, KY

### ROADS?

A sunny afternoon in late April. I've just turned in my grades for the semester, and I'm strolling across campus to talk over my summer schedule with my department chair. Outside Centennial Hall, a group of communications students are filming a promotional video for our freshman summer orientation. The young lady behind the camera notices that I've paused, and with smiling recognition, she permits my intrusion through the scene. The video's leading actor, a young man with a mop of blonde hair, takes a break, adeptly flipping his skateboard upright, catching one end in his hand, and momentarily balancing his weight on it like a short cane. His colorful t-shirt grabs my attention. "It's our new motto for next year," he says, pointing to the one-word question on the front: "Roads?" Then he spins around to show me the answer on the back: "Where we're going, we don't need roads." I smile and nod, "Cool," and continue on my way.

The motto, borrowed from the popular 80s film *Back to the Future*, posits a dynamic image of learning: learning is an adventure, a quest that will lead you off the map and into uncharted territory. I like the implication that learning is an exploration of the wilderness—new ideas and concerns that challenge you to blaze your own trail, to make your own meanings of the things you encounter. This idea resonates with my own teaching of writing: pioneer into new spaces and slowly begin to map out the terrain, identifying the paths where others have explored and making your own new paths.

I also know that mapping the wilderness of college work and life can be disorienting. For freshmen, leaving home and the comfort of familiar faces and places is a momentous and, perhaps, traumatic transition. We need only look at attrition rates for freshmen in many colleges and universities to understand the difficulties many young people have adjusting to college, learning to negotiate the obstacles and recognize the resources available to them, and trying to map out the realities of a new life. At my previous institution (a large university with a freshman attrition rate approaching an alarming 50%), our writing program pioneered an experimental composition "course in orientation" with the underlying goal of improving retention of first-year students. Believing that a freshman writing course was ideally suited for getting students to explore and to express what it means to move between different places and times and to make sense of those movements, we sequenced our writing assignments along a conceptual trajectory. Students explored their pasts, presents, and futures in relation to notions of "place": place as geography—region, city, neighborhood, campus—and place as idea or feeling, i.e. "a sense of one's place" in these worlds.

The course's impact on retention was, to my knowledge, inconsequential, but it made for some interesting fieldwork and writing projects. I'm thinking in particular of a collaborative, community research project by two female students. Both students' families had deep roots in the area, and both were interested in researching the histories of certain African American communities, or "enclaves"—some still vibrant today, others existing only in the collective memories of elders—and archiving these histories for future generations. Because of the course's overarching theme, "place," students were encouraged to conduct fieldwork, to explore the community surrounding the campus and the broader region as a whole. They were encouraged to meet people, to learn new stories about

the place they were now calling home. For these two “local” students, this project presented a way to connect family history and personal understanding of place with scholarship on identity, race, and cultural geography.

One key to their success was guidance. Sure, I offered them a teacher’s encouragement and support, but the guidance that benefited them the most was derived from their collaboration: each one listened and responded to what the other had to say and write so that both could discover “a voice”—a rhetorical equivalent to finding a way through “the wilderness” of higher education. They made frequent visits to the local historical society; they conducted life history interviews with relatives and community elders; they collected images and documented places and people with their own cameras, and they created multivoiced texts that were part personal narrative, part oral history, and part academic research essay. In short, they were able to do academic things—to make new meanings—with indigenous themes of their lives and experiences. They were able to orient their personal and academic lives, to use writing as a compass to coordinate where they had been with where they were going.

“Where we’re going, we don’t need roads.” I repeat the motto as I walk away from the young film-makers. “Okay,” I think, “but we’ll need a compass.” We’ll always need a compass if we’re going to orient ourselves to the wilderness of ideas, forms, and styles. A compass enables us to form a relationship between where we are and where we might want to be, and the writing center is ideally suited for this purpose.

## DISORIENTATION

As the new Writing Center Director at a small, liberal arts college in rural Appalachia, I am already keenly aware of the disorientation of first-year students. They wander into the center with worried, anxious faces. Sometimes they’re angry; sometimes they’re resigned, as if they’ve finally conceded to themselves that they can’t “do school.” Sometimes they’re just confused by assignments, requirements, expectations, instructions, conventions, and the language of their professors. They’ve been dropped off in the wilderness, and now, not surprisingly, they’re lost. What is most alarming is the small percentage of freshmen that find the center at all. We advertise, we visit classes, we send mass e-mails, and we remind faculty at meetings. We even stop students on the sidewalk, but ultimately, it’s a matter of will. Students have to make the decision to come. Some do, but far too many do not and continue to wander alone, the wilderness growing stranger and more ominous with each passing day. One day, these students just disappear, dropping off the map and leaving only lackluster traces in a few professors’ grade-books.

At some point, we have all experienced this kind of disorientation, perhaps as undergraduates, perhaps as graduate students. For me, the experience is still relatively fresh in my mind. The years I spent finishing my dissertation were some of the loneliest of my life. Of course, I wasn’t literally “alone.” I had the support of my wife and the joyful distraction of my daughter, but academically, I was square in the middle of no-man’s land—another desolate region from which past, present and future all appear shaky, blurred, uncertain. But I made it through; I survived. I had years of academic know-how to draw upon. Freshmen, particularly those who are first-generation college students, have no such reservoir of experience and cannot necessarily rely on mom or dad for advice on how to survive in the wilderness.

The fact that so many young people lose their bearings makes me wonder what role writing centers play in improving retention rates of first-year students. Where, in the rich and extensive scholarship on writing, can we find guidance for addressing attrition, a map to help reorient us to the needs of our

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### TESOL Writing Specialist, Writing Center Baruch College

The Writing Center at Baruch College provides support for student writers to improve their writing and English language skills and to become independent, confident, and versatile writers. As part of our expansion, we invite applications for the position of TESOL Writing Specialist.

Start date: August 18, 2008.

Salary: \$35.21/hour, 20 hours/week, 36 weeks/year. Occasional evening and weekend hours may be required.

Qualifications: M.A. or equivalent in TESOL, applied linguistics, or related field; knowledge of writing center and composition theories and pedagogies; experience teaching and tutoring at the college level and in training and staff development; computer and internet literacy; excellent administrative, organizational, and interpersonal skills.

Application process: Submit a letter of interest, current CV, and the names of three professional references to Dr. Maria Jerskey at [maria\\_jerskey@baruch.cuny.edu](mailto:maria_jerskey@baruch.cuny.edu). Review of applications began May 27, 2008.

Maria Jerskey, Ph.D., Director, Writing Center  
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Web site: <<http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/writingcenter>>.

most vulnerable students? As a new writing center director, I am convinced that our center can serve as a compass in the wilderness that confronts our students.

### CENTERING THE DISCIPLINE

Writing center scholarship has served as a compass—a reality-check—for the field of Composition itself, re-orienting practitioners to the discipline's most fundamental values and beliefs. Stephen North's seminal work, "The Idea of a Writing Center" was an early call for reorientation. Written in an era of prolific qualitative research into communication and literacy practices—the early years of the discipline's insatiable appetite for new concepts, models, metaphors, and theories—North's piece spelled out the lack of real attitudinal and pedagogical change within English departments following the process revolution in Composition (23) and re-centered collaboration and dialogue (or conversation) in our thinking about teaching and writing:

Nearly everyone who writes likes—and needs—to talk about his or her writing, preferable to someone who will really listen, who knows how to listen, and knows how to talk about writing too. Maybe in a perfect world, all writers would have their own ready auditor—a teacher, a classmate, a roommate, an editor—who would not only listen but draw them out, ask them questions they would not think to ask themselves. A writing center is an institutional response to this need. . . . Writing centers are simply one manifestation—polished and highly visible—of a dialogue about writing that is central to higher education. (29)

North's idea of the writing center complemented the work of other "revolutionary" compositionists with the recognition that writing necessitates *dialogue*. All writers, and inexperienced writers in particular, need real audiences, need to be heard and responded to in order to develop their writing. Writers need fellow travelers with whom to share the journey, a fresh pair of eyes and ears to help negotiate the hazards and appreciate the vistas.

North's attention to audience echoed the work of James Moffett. For Moffett, learning to write and to use the discursive conventions of a particular community "requires the particular feedback of human response. . . . This response would be candid and specific. Adjustments in language, form, and content would come as the writer's response to his audience's response. Thus instruction would always be individual, relevant, and timely" (191-93). While Moffett's discussion of feedback was directed toward peers in a classroom setting, his ideas apply directly to the context of a writing center tutorial. Writing centers, after all, owe their very existence to the writer's need for guidance on the path of discovery.

The idea that writing centers can initiate "a dialogue about writing" also resonates with Ann Berthoff's notion of "interpretive paraphrase." Interpretive paraphrase is a constructive use of "chaos"—an invitation to contemplate the interplay of features comprising the intricate, rain forest-like ecology of writing—and a continual questioning of alternate meanings. Berthoff explains:

Students learn to use ambiguities as "the hinges of thought" as they learn to formulate alternate readings; to say it again, watching how "it" changes. . . . Interpretive paraphrase enacts the dialogue that is at the heart of all composing: a writer is in dialogue with his various selves and with his audience. . . . The composition classroom ought to be a place where the various selves are heard and an audience's response is heard—listened to and responded to. (71-72)

This continual exchange between writer and listener (reader), writer and self, is the process of critical inquiry through which, Berthoff tells us, students begin "to see relationships and to discover that that is what they do with their minds" (72). Writing tutorials externalize the interpretive paraphrase—the inner dialogue; tutors listen to a student's text and offer alternate readings (addressing the text at lexical, syntactical, and discursive levels). Berthoff, citing I. A. Richards, describes ambiguity as "a hinge of thought." The hinge represents a dynamic relationship between two things, in this case, the meaning(s)



the student has created on the page and the alternate meaning(s) created by the tutor's suggestions. The hinge—commonly associated with a gate or a door—might also represent transition on a student's journey: a passing through, a conceptual archway where students' thinking and writing are complemented by alternate readings provided by their tutors.

In this conceptualization, the writing center serves as guide, fellow traveler, co-cartographer, exploring and identifying key features of the territory alongside the student—making sense of the concepts and conventions of academia so that students, as Kenneth Bruffee argues, might enter into “the kinds of conversation valued by college teachers” (400). Moffett, Berthoff, and Bruffee each address the most fundamental development in the process (r)evolution of Composition: the recognition of collaboration as pedagogical enactment of a social theory of language and literacy. North reinvestigates this crucial pedagogical understanding, positing the writing center in the heart of the discipline.

## CONCLUSION

In the two decades following North's article, researchers, theorists, and practitioners have continued to push the boundaries of our field. Composition is the tropical rain forest of academic disciplines, a wilderness teeming with diversity and capable of supporting countless, colorful species. This depth and scope presents our freshmen travelers with unique and challenging courses of exploration. The writing center is the landmark feature of this diverse environment, and it serves as a compass because it reinforces, through persistent reenactments, the most basic and fundamental understandings of our discipline: the inherently social nature of language learning and the dialogue, to echo Berthoff, that lies at the heart of the composing process. Most importantly, the writing center unites fellow travelers and models learning not as a solitary exploration but as a journey to be *shared*.

## AFTERTHOUGHT: WHERE WE'RE GOING, WE DON'T NEED ROADS

After a short conversation with my chair, I pass the film crew again on the way back to our Writing Center. I qualify our motto: “Where we're going, we don't need roads because we'll make our own together.” We all exchange smiles and nods. Naturally, the end of the semester is a time for reflection. I'm reminded that my journey with one group of students has reached a milestone: we'll continue the journey, but we'll share it with new travelers. The end of each semester also represents a beginning. Lessons learned from previous journeys provide some context and direction, but the fine details of the next adventure will only be discovered en route. The courses we've plotted and the maps we've made will have to be revised, as each team of travelers charts their course anew. ♦

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Workshop Coordinator and ESL Writing Consultant Case Western Reserve University

The Department of English in the College of Arts & Sciences at Case Western Reserve University invites applications for a full-time, non-tenure track position at the rank of lecturer to serve as Workshop Coordinator and ESL Writing Consultant. Responsibilities include preparing and leading business and other disciplinary writing workshops, providing individual writing instruction to undergraduate and graduate non-native English speakers. Ability to work evenings desirable. Preference will be given to candidates familiar with current writing presentation technology and experience working with non-native speakers of English. Ph.D preferred. Salary \$35,500 and benefits. Initial appointment for one year, possibly renewable for up to three years. Electronic applications only (consisting of a letter of application and a c.v.) to William R. Siebensschuh, Chair, at wrs2@case.edu. Other correspondence to William R. Siebensschuh, Chair, English department Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio 44106.

All applications received by June 15, 2008 will receive full consideration. Case Western Reserve University is committed to diversity and is an affirmative action, equal opportunity employer. Applications from women and members of minority groups are particularly encouraged.

# TUTOR'S COLUMN

## OVERCOMING THE SILENCE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE MIDDLE GROUND OF DIRECTIVITY

◆ Lauren Kopec  
Stony Brook University  
Stony Brook, NY

It's a Monday afternoon, and you find yourself in the middle of your worst tutoring nightmare. As you are anxiously staring at your tutee's paper, waiting for her to respond to your question, "What is your thesis," you are met with a deafening silence. You are not alone. As writing tutors, it is not uncommon to elicit a blank stare or a nervous laugh instead of an actual answer to what seems like an easily answerable question. What is a tutor to do in this situation? Should we give our students an answer or sit there and stare them down until they come up with one of their own?

Often, tutors feel forced to decide between squandering a session with bouts of silence or acting as a dictator instead of a peer. Tutors hesitate to explore the often over-looked middle ground. However, it is possible to find the balance between being overly directive and completely non-directive. This principle of "degree of directivity" involves analyzing the dynamic of the tutoring session and then utilizing that typically forgotten ability to compromise between two extremes. After evaluating a tape-recorded session, I found that varying my "degree of directivity" was helpful when asking my tutee a question that I felt was especially challenging to them, or when I could sense that my tutee's body language indicated she was not engaged with the session. I quickly discovered that asking a student open-ended directive questions with a low degree of directivity can actually be beneficial to both the tutee and the session itself.

As I reviewed my first tutoring session, I realized I had asked two very different yet closely related questions: open-ended directive and open-ended non-directive. While both these types of questions allow for conversation, open-ended directive questions often lead the student's words in a certain direction. The optimal type of question to ask is the open-ended non-directive question, which is designed to elicit a response from students without the tutor hinting towards the "correct" answer. Jenny, my first student in the writing center, struggled with answering these types of questions:

**Lauren:** In this first paragraph you introduce a lot of great ideas. Which one is the most important to you?

**Jenny:** Uhm... [long pause] ...I'm not sure what you want me to say.

**Lauren:** Well, keep in mind that you can't be right or wrong. I don't have anything in mind. Just tell me what you want to say.

**Jenny:** Well...okay...uhm [long pause] ...I want someone to read this and think. I want someone to read this paragraph and see that parents' paying for their children's breast surgery is a problem [points to second sentence in her paper].

During Jenny's long pause, I was given two opportunities as a tutor. I could have chosen the "easy way" out and directed Jenny with some sort of instructive suggestion, or I could have waited patiently as Jenny's wheels turned, and she cranked out an answer belonging all to her. All I needed to give Jenny was a few moments to get her gears in motion, and as a result she was able to essentially identify and articulate the purpose of her own paper. Through this method of non-directive questioning, students get the opportunity to validate their own ideas rather than maneuvering their way to the tutor's desired response.

In this case, the question itself was not an unusually challenging one. It asked for her own thoughts and ideas. Secondly, though Jenny took some time responding to the question, she was still completely engaged in the session while searching for her answer. Her eyes were following her index finger as it skimmed the paragraph, and she was moving her lips as she read her own words. Certainly, Jenny was looking for an answer, and all I needed to do was give her a few moments to find it.

There may be other cases, however, where students never begin this search in the first place. When I asked Jenny to explain one of the comments her professor had made about her paper, she responded with a question:

**Jenny:** Well, right here... what does she mean by the ego of parents?

**Lauren:** [opens up tutee's paper on plastic surgery] Okay, try looking at your own paper, and see if you can find anything you say that

relates to the ego of parents when it comes to their children's plastic surgery.

[After the most excruciating three- or four-minute pause, when I had racked my brain for any possible non-directive prompt, I gave up.]

Maybe right here where you say parents want to make their children happy?

**Jenny:** Yea, parents think that if their kids get mad at them then they will insult them. Ya know? They really care what their children think of them. They are trying to protect themselves from that...[long pause] protect their ego.

It dawned on me that Jenny might have had absolutely no idea what a possible answer was and didn't realize it until I made the connection, or she may have known the answer all along but for one reason or another chose not to say it. This is the biggest risk associated with asking open-ended directive questions, making the assumption that writers need direction in the first place. In this case, I made that assumption based on two determining factors. First, the question itself was a bit more difficult than any other I had asked Jenny so far. I was challenging her to interpret someone else's words and relate them to her own. Second, I had completely lost Jenny at this point in the session. She was concentrating on pretty much anything except thinking about her paper and making eye contact with me. My goal then was to bring Jenny back into the session without putting a leash around her pencil and leading her there. If we, as writing tutors, are continuously leading students towards an ideal text (or in this case the ideal answer), then we are defeating the purpose we hope to serve—creating a relationship between writers and their own words. However, if we can use these directive prompts to push the student towards actively pursuing their own ideas, then we are achieving the same goals that are set with non-directive strategies—thinking about, talking about, and evaluating their own writing.

In Jeff Brooks's article on minimalist tutoring strategies, he not only allows but encourages the idea of asking prompting questions. "Get the student to talk. It's her paper; she is the expert on it. Ask questions—perhaps 'leading' questions—as often as possible" (4). In other words, because questions are so useful in helping writers achieve their own writing goals, it is sometimes okay to lead our tutees to explore certain aspects of their own papers. In these cases, it becomes a question of "degree of directivity." While questions can be categorized as open-ended directive or open-ended non-directive, it is within these categories that they can be organized by degree. For example, the question, "Can your thesis be found somewhere in this paragraph?" and "Is the last sentence of this paragraph your thesis?" are both open-ended directive questions. However, in one instance the tutor leaves room for the tutee to home in on her own focus, and the other question finds the focus for the student. One question is obviously more directive than the other, and this is a prime example of degree of directivity.

Essentially, what I am suggesting is that tutors vary their "degree of directivity" based on the dynamic of each session. I found that it helps to evaluate the session in terms of whether or not the question asked is difficult, and whether or not the student is engaged with the session. These two aspects will always vary, and there will never be a right or a wrong approach to tutoring a particular student. It is more a matter of using our best judgment to determine which strategies will work for which writers. Andrea Lunsford, in her article, "Collaboration, Control and the Idea of a Writing Center," explains that the job of the writing center is to "help students get in touch with knowledge as a way to find their unique voices, their individual and unique powers" (48). Maintaining a tutee's uniqueness is still possible with a low degree of directivity. As writing tutors, it is extremely important to decide whether or not our degree of directivity is genuinely helping our writers discover and nurture their own processes. ♦

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# CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

**June 19-22, 2008:** European Writing Centers Conference, in Freiburg, Germany

**Contact:** Gerd Braeuer at [braeuer@ph-freiburg.de](mailto:braeuer@ph-freiburg.de); Conference Web site: <http://www.ph-freiburg.de/ewca2008/>.

**Oct. 30-Nov.1, 2008:** International Writing Centers Association/National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, in Las Vegas, NV

**Contact:** Claire Hughes: [clairehughes@weber.edu](mailto:clairehughes@weber.edu). Conference Web site: <http://departments.weber.edu/writingcenter/IWCA.htm>.

**April 2-4, 2009:** South Central Writing Centers Association, in Georgetown, TX

**Contact:** Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton ([piedmone@southwestern.edu](mailto:piedmone@southwestern.edu)) and Cole Bennett ([bcb00b@acu.edu](mailto:bcb00b@acu.edu)).

## Clients with Severe Mental Disorders

*(continued from page 9)*

### Further Reading

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