

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E W T T E R

Volume 32, Number 4

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

December, 2007

— FROM THE EDITOR —

When assembling an issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, I try to include manuscripts in the order they are ready for publication. And sometimes, there is a common theme in the grouping. In this December issue of *WLN*, the articles focus on issues in writing centers that we may all have encountered. (I hesitate to label these “issues” as problems, but in some ways they are.)

Janet Auten and Melissa Pasterkiewicz offer their insights and suggestions for how tutors can help students understand instructor comments on their papers. Then Valerie Balester and Nathalie Singh-Corcoran, in reviewing *The Everyday Writing Center*, share their responses to a book they find helps them move away from the habitual to “reposition our problems as challenges that yield to infinite possibilities.” Jennifer Jefferson continues this theme of considering potentially difficult situations in writing centers by reflecting on whether instructors who also work as tutors should tutor their own students. Finally, Lauren Bisson quizzes her colleagues and friends to find suggestions for that horrible moment in a tutorial when a student starts to cry.

Such are the topics these authors focus on, and their discussions should help us contemplate and cope with concerns we share with them.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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THE THIRD VOICE IN THE SESSION: HELPING STUDENTS INTERPRET TEACHERS' COMMENTS ON THEIR PAPERS

◆ Janet Auten
◆ Melissa Pasterkiewicz
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When it comes to responding to students' papers, the writing center and the classroom require contrasting strategies. This difference can disturb writing center sessions when students seek help puzzling out the message of a teacher's marks on their papers. As a writing center director (Janet) and a graduate-student writing consultant (Melissa), we have noticed the way writing center work sometimes seems to involve a struggle with that “third person in the session,” the classroom teacher. Our aim in this paper is to examine how writing consultants might better understand teacher comments and in turn, better help students understand, interpret, and respond to teacher comments.

Janet: While studying both teachers' and students' attitudes toward teachers' comments on papers over the years, I have found that students seem both eager and deferential in their attitudes toward teachers' comments on their papers. But no matter how teachers might portray their comments as “reader feedback” or “conversations” with students, most students acknowledge that in commenting on a paper, the teacher gets the floor—more like an orator who speaks to an audience than a conver-

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Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is approximately 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutors' Column essays, in MLA format. If possible, please send as attached files in an e-mail to submission@writinglabnewsletter.org.

sation partner. While the first-year college students I have surveyed find many features of a college composition class new and unfamiliar, all are familiar with teacher comments, and most agree with the student who said, "Teachers' comments are necessary. It is not my place to say whether I like or dislike them." However these same students, all first-year college writers, typically falter as readers and interpreters of faculty comments. One respondent noted, "When they say 'explain' or something, I'm not always positive [about] what they want me to follow up with. Sometimes I think that my [papers] speak for themselves."

Meanwhile, the first-year composition instructors I surveyed were often both thoughtful and apprehensive about the words they choose when they comment, conscious of their inevitable evaluative weight. As one teacher explained, "I guess they see me as the guy with the red pen, even though I don't use a red pen." Another noted, "I know that many read and reread (and read again) my comments, interpreting every word. They look for clues like they hunt for Easter eggs. . . . They expect A's, don't get them, and want to know how to 'fix' it."

No wonder, then, that a teacher's efforts to spur students to deeper thinking and re-vision through comments may be misinterpreted. As we all have seen in the writing center, comments easily become sites of misunderstanding and miscommunication. Peter Elbow has identified three different purposes for commenting: ranking (reading to assign a grade), evaluating, or simply appreciating what the writer is trying to do (what Elbow terms "liking"). In writing centers, we often focus our energies on the last of these, while for teachers, who ultimately must assign grades, ranking and evaluating unavoidably predominate. So, for students, teacher comments aren't "conversation" but an expression of evaluation. A majority of students in my surveys claim the purpose of teacher comments is to justify a grade. And research on commenting supports that notion that teacher comments function mainly "to justify and explain final grades. . . [as] 'autopsies' representing a full stop rather than any medial stage in the writing process" (Connors and Lunsford 213).

For us in the writing center, working at the intersection of student, teacher, and academy, this means a writing consultant may sometimes "function as a translator or interpreter, offering his or her own responses as a reader and articulating the expectations" that seem to be expressed in teacher comments (Matsushashi et.al. 298).

Melissa: I became interested in the possible problems posed by teacher comments in the writing center after I had several sessions in a row with students working on revisions. One student in particular, a freshman I'll call Bill, illustrated to me how we can help translate the teacher's comments into an active dialogue aimed at realizing the original intention of the comments—as suggestions for improving the paper and encouraging further thinking.

Bill entered the session exhausted and confused with deep bags under his eyes. He let me know that he had been "up all night" working on a revision of his narrative essay for his College Writing class. Before we began, he flipped to the page-long typed sheet of his teacher's comments at the back of the essay, gesturing at it with the frustrated explanation that the comments "made no sense." He then pointed to several marginal comments within the essay that identified misuse of passive voice (along with other grammatical errors) and explained that while he didn't quite understand passive voice, he had attempted to fix it.

After reading the teacher comments, I discovered what the teacher believed to be the main problem of the essay: every time Bill started to get into an intriguing aspect of his issue (homophobia in the south) he stopped and switched gears. The teacher then asked a lot of questions based upon possible areas of focus: all the budding observations in his paper that he could more deeply investigate. He certainly wasn't meant to address all of the questions, and he could even choose a different set of questions to address, but all in all, her questions were meant to get him to think more deeply and analytically on the subject of homophobia and to focus his efforts. But in reading Bill's revision, I realized that he had been so overwhelmed by the endnote that he had ignored all of the global changes the teacher had identified. Instead he had attended almost exclusively to the grammatical and sentence level concerns the teacher had noted in the margins.

Janet: As Melissa's examples illustrate, working with students and their teacher comments positions writing center consultants as mediators in that "middle ground where their role is that of translator or interpreter, turning teacher language into student language" (Harris 37). With an understanding of how and why most teachers write comments, consultants can establish a sense of what such "translation" work might entail:

1. STUDENTS NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE REASON FOR COMMENTING AND THE WAYS WRITERS CAN MAKE GOOD USE OF COMMENTS.

While many teachers may try to avoid "appropriating student texts" just as writing consultants do, most teachers comment directly, and the majority of marginal marks outside of writing classes are linked directly to a grade. Even if they may want to give students valuable "reader response," teachers comment to direct students toward change—either as revisions of the present paper or improvement for future work. Depending on the type of course and genre of writing, teacher comments must carry out several functions. The resulting comments may communicate, as Anne Greenhalgh points out, "two conflicting voices, one appealing to the seemingly immutable and immaterial authority of 'diction' and the other to the immediate and material experience of reading the essay" (405). As Melissa's session with Bill makes clear, students who don't know how to make use of comments to re-vise focus instead on surface corrections and changes that they know how to perform.

2. CONSULTANTS NEED TO REMEMBER THAT A TEACHER'S ADVICE CAN CONFUSE OR OVERWHELM A STUDENT.

As Melissa found with Bill, sometimes there are simply those "gaps between what teachers intend and what students understand" in teachers' comments (Grimm and Penti 196). Remembering the power inherent in teachers' words, consultants should encourage students to ask for clarification from the instructor. Students are sometimes reluctant to raise questions of a teacher's own written directions. Still in the role of translator, the consultant can help students create a strategy for meeting with an instructor, formulating questions and pinpointing where and why comments are confusing.

“Writing consultants have the doubly difficult task of translating the teacher comments into language the student can understand and making the revision process seem feasible and approachable rather than overwhelming.”

3. A SESSION ABOUT TEACHER COMMENTS CAN GET DERAILED WHEN A STUDENT MISREADS GUIDANCE AS DISAPPROVAL AND REJECTION OF THEIR IDEAS.

Whether the comments seem genuinely mean-spirited or the student is simply interpreting them that way, writing consultants need to defuse this situation through empathy and dialogue. In some cases, “a large number of comments ‘means’ (from the student’s perception) that the teacher didn’t like the paper” (Harris 38). A relaxed conversation in the center allows students to vent their frustration and then, with guidance from consultants, begin to see what can be done with the paper. Consultants need to recognize that inexperienced students may need to interpret their teacher’s advice *as advice*. It helps to take comments as simply directive rather than punitive. By talking with the student about the goals and purposes of the class, consultants can help make an important link between course and teacher expectations.

Melissa: In an attempt to bridge the gap between the teacher’s intention and Bill’s understanding, I tried posing the questions the teacher had asked in her endnote. Bill responded that he didn’t want to deal with those questions; he wanted to deal with what was already in his paper. Bill had interpreted the questions not as a method for focusing the subject of his paper but as a request that he write an entirely different, unrelated paper. So I tried a different tactic. I asked Bill to explain the connections between the various sections of his paper—how the language of homophobia related to the people who exhibited homophobic tendencies, and so on. And while we did need to discuss his tendency to “just add a sentence or two” of clarification, we made some progress on the bigger concerns of the paper once I had put the teacher’s concerns in different words.

When we had only ten minutes left of the session, I stopped and switched gears to talk about passive voice, which had been Bill’s initial concern. I explained the basics of active/passive verbs, emphasized that passive voice often obscures the subject, and created a few example sentences, but I received mostly blank stares. Then, I asked Bill to write a few additional sentences at the end of his paper where he had been vague. When he wrote a new sentence in passive voice, I was able to point to it and say, “There! Who is doing that?” Bill sat back in his chair and said, “Oooh. I see what you mean.”

At this point, I was able to help Bill take a step back and catch a glimpse of his own writing process. This is the goal of any writing center session—to help a student improve as a writer, not just as a writer of a particular paper. Bill then explained to me that he used passive voice a lot when he was first starting a paper. I explained that I too often used passive voice in a first draft when I was still working through my thoughts. We then commiserated that passive voice sounded more rhythmic and intelligent, and it took a lot of effort to jolt ourselves out of using it. This was one of the few moments of the session where Bill finally let go of some of his anxiety. I took the opportunity to sum up our discussion on the First Order Concerns (FOCs) of his paper and point him in the direction of further revision.

Janet: We have all seen the students who settle on avoidance as the best defense against critical comments. Unfortunately, students become frustrated both with writing and with teacher comments that seem to be a constant list of criticisms. The effects of past as well as present critical comments on student writers can cloud and complicate a writing center session. Summer Smith explains that students may be reluctant revisers because they “are intimidated by the negative evaluations that lie just beneath the surface of most suggestions and offers, and by the teacher’s

TAKE NOTE

ROCKY MOUNTAIN PEER TUTORING CONFERENCE

Call for Proposals
April 11-12, 2008
Boise, Idaho

For the 15th Annual Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference, we at the Boise State Writing Center ask you to think about writing centers as oases, as possible points of respite in the otherwise difficult terrain of the academy. Yet we also encourage you to complicate and question that portrayal—when might we wish to refuse the image of a writing center as oasis?

Proposal deadline is Feb. 3, 2008. Send proposals to Mike Mattison, michaelmattison@boisestate.edu or Zachery Koppelman, zachkoppelman@boisestate.edu

Conference Web site: <<http://www.boisestate.edu/wcenter/rmptc/rm-ptic.htm>>.

display of power through commands” (260). Her study of teachers’ end comments reveals a generic pattern in which teachers begin with positive remarks but then tack on a negative evaluation and don’t seem to be focused on individual but on “a generic student” (261) in their comments. In turn, students may see the negative as the real reason for the grade and therefore the most important part.

In one of the consultant comment sheets that I read daily in our writing center, I noted an example of what happens when the teacher’s intention in commenting isn’t understood by the student, who may be looking for directions rather than explanations. The writing consultant reported the student had expressed anger and confusion about “what he took to be conflicting comments: praise on his voice within the paper, and then criticism at the end.” While it may be obvious to us as “outside” readers that teachers are praising something in students’ work in order to balance criticism much as we do in writing center sessions, an anxious student may see only conflicting “directions.”

Our experiences and research have clarified for us some ideas about working with students and teacher comments. Here are descriptions of four common kinds of teacher comments that consultants will certainly encounter in the Writing Center and some suggestions for handling them:

1.) *Directive comments on clarity, form, and style.*

These we’re most familiar with and most capable of interpreting. Examples include: “You need to focus your topic,” “your transitions are choppy,” and “your thesis is unclear—what are you arguing?” Consultants can easily convert these comments into questions that help students discover their purpose or recognize a pattern of error for themselves.

2.) *Comments concerning discipline-specific terminology or methodology*

Each discipline has specific research/writing methods and terminology students must learn. The teacher often develops these phrases as a class vernacular that students are expected to know, and uses them to discuss complicated ideas or structure within the comments. Since comments should speak to the assignment, we always ask students to bring paper guidelines or assignment sheets to the Center with them. When students bring in the assignment, we can help them discover whether they’re following organizational guidelines or engaging fully with specified theoretical frameworks. Of course, with or without the assignment, consultants can always point out terms and concepts as an “outsider” and ask students to explain them.

3.) *Vague comments or cryptic/uncommon abbreviations*

A consultant need not try to decipher comments that are confusing or vague. It is not our job to try to guess what a teacher’s intention might be or what a weird abbreviation means. Admit confusion and send the student back to the teacher.

4.) *Comments that hurt*

Here empathy is key: the student will be upset, certainly, and may not be in a state of mind to look at his or her paper objectively or hear advice right away. It is important to help students try to see past the negative to some positive strategies for change. Consultants can help by letting the student blow off some steam—without getting sucked into bashing the teacher—and empathizing with their own experience with papers that were “bled all over.” Then, by gently refocusing the conversation, the consultant can marginalize the red pen of judgment into a manageable space and translate teacher comments into helpful, non-judgmental dialogue.

In writing centers, we typically attend to FOCs rather than SOCs (Second Order Concerns) before looking at individual sentences, and sometimes we must subvert students’ tendency to equate

NEWS

WRITING CENTER HANDOUTS RESOURCE WIKI

Recently on WCENTER (the email list for people interested in writing center work) the topic of “handouts” has come up again. This discussion has occurred previously, and IWCA established a “handouts” Web site committee to develop a Web site that would house resources for the writing center community. I rather liked that idea, but felt that the usefulness of the Web site would be considerably constrained if it were bottle-necked through an overworked Web master or site editor.

Given my role as IWCA Web Editor at that time, I proposed the use of a wiki to solve the bottle-necking problem. Almost immediately, however, a disagreement arose about the academic rigor of such a site if it were left completely open to anyone and (perhaps) everyone editing it. I believe that this concern is valid, but I also think that constraining the wiki to a select group of editors has stifled the project.

Therefore, I took it upon myself to revamp the IWCA Handouts Resource wiki by placing a very specific disclaimer on the page that states that IWCA does not vouch for the content for authenticity or endorse any particular method described. I also noted very specifically that the site is open to anyone to edit, not just a select few. I think this is the only way that the resource is going to develop. No doubt there will be bad information provided and approaches that others don't endorse. I believe, however, that such conflict will work itself out collaboratively. If we have to flag pages as problematic, then that decision will be made collaboratively.”

Please check out the revived IWCA Handouts Resource wiki at <<http://writingcenters.org/handouts/index.php>>.

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teacher comments with sentence-level editing. Ultimately, feedback from both teachers and writing consultants aims to help students enter the chaos of revision and loosen their attachment to their prose in order for it to develop and grow. However, we need to remember that this is a new and frightening concept for many beginning writers, so feedback—whether from teachers or consultants— may seem overwhelming. Writing consultants have the doubly difficult task of translating the teacher comments into language the student can understand and making the revision process seem feasible and approachable rather than overwhelming. With a better understanding of teacher comments, we can use that “third voice” in the session to work with us in that task. ♦

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BOOK REVIEW

Geller, Anne Ellen, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth H. Bouquet. *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2007. \$22.95

Reviewed by:

- ◆ Valerie Balester, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX
- ◆ Nathalie Singh-Corcoran, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV

The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice has created a buzz among writing center professionals. Co-written by Anne Ellen Geller, Michelle Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth H. Boquet, this recent Utah Press publication of 144 pages manages to address the topics we have most on our minds, while providing a fresh perspective on our work. Its writerly voice, which serves as a metaphor for the writing center community (diverse but with common goals), brings us together for soul-searching and, we hope, change. We read it together, and we found ourselves in agreement about its magic. *The Everyday Writing Center* has the effect, most desired in any book, to make us think more deeply about our own writing centers and interrogate our habits. We think it will result in little, everyday changes in writing centers and in institutions of higher learning across the nation, and that the cumulative effect will be both exhilarating and profound.

The writers stress that we should (as writing center practitioners) examine the hard stuff in our writing center work—the things we have questions about, the things that make us uncomfortable. Their challenge hearkens to Nancy Welch's *Getting Restless: Rethinking Revision in Writing Instruction*, in which she proposes a reconsideration of revision. She argues that when we approach revision and when we teach it, our goal is to seek out and eliminate the inconsistencies: the contradictions, the underdeveloped ideas, and those ideas that just don't fit. Instead of erasure, Welch asks that we explore the disorienting moments in our texts and we turn (and help our students turn) those "moments into productive sites for examining, questioning, and straying toward alternatives" (4). In the same way, the authors of *The Everyday Writing Center* believe that we should begin with dissonance. As center professionals, we need to work with discord and reposition our problems as challenges that yield infinite possibilities.

The writers also remind us that we all have times when everything runs according to plan, and we proceed by habit. We may be grateful for these everyday moments, our neatly scheduled appointments, our tutor training agendas, everything going smoothly and predictably. But, if we are lucky, "Trickster may, in a moment, flash before us some realization of the import and impact of an array of unconscious meanings embedded in our practices" (19). Writing center work can seem mundane and everyday to those who label it as mere service, but this book helps us see the inspiration in it. Using primarily Wenger, sometimes Lave or de Certeau, the co-authors show how we as a community reify the everyday and, then projecting our reifications into the world, trip over our "things" as we negotiate and participate on a moment-to-moment basis: "we may order our lives—and our work—around ideas that we would eschew if we were aware of them" (18-19). If we are mindful, the authors show, if we attend to our inner Tricksters, we can see through the reifications at opportune times, and see behind our practices so that we can interrogate them, maybe change things, maybe even revolutionize them.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

WRITING CENTER DIRECTOR
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

We seek candidates with a specialization in writing center studies or related area to lead an innovative writing center that can serve as the hub for the study and teaching of writing and rhetoric on our campus. The successful candidate will contribute to our MA and PhD emphasis in Written Discourse by developing courses in area of specialization (including writing center studies), guiding and supporting graduate and undergraduate research in writing center studies and related areas, and maintaining an active scholarly and professional presence in the larger writing center community. Teaching responsibilities include one or two graduate courses per year, including a graduate-level course required of all incoming Graduate Assistants (designed to introduce them to writing center theory and practice and support their work in our Writing Center). Reduced teaching load for administrative responsibilities.

Required: Doctorate in hand by the start date of August 2008, strong commitment to teaching excellence and research, experience in writing centers, strong leadership skills **Preferred:** interdisciplinary experience, interest in promoting writing and the Writing Center through means that extend beyond the traditional (including podcasting, newsletters, community outreach), ability to contribute to the shape and function of our PhD program in English.

Review begins immediately and will continue until the position is filled. Send letter of application, vita, 3 recent letters of recommendation, a one-page teaching philosophy, and transcripts to:

Composition Search Committee
Dept. of Literature and Languages
Texas A&M-Commerce
Commerce, Texas 75429.

Trickster, the subject of Chapter two (“Trickster at Your Table”) occupies the margins and peeks around the pages throughout *The Everyday Writing Center*. Trickster, the liminal figure who occupies the border spaces betwixt and between, seems the perfect metaphor for our need to stop and reflect seriously on what we do in everyday practice. Trickster’s skill as shape-shifter, joint-disturber, and bricoleur is emphasized, but Trickster is also evoked for a sense of humor, cleverness, and wit with words. Trickster is calling when we feel those moments of dissonance, inviting us to re-frame. Time becomes a prime example, in Chapter three, “Beat (Not) the Poor Clock,” of a normalized and thus invisible practice that Trickster calls to our attention. As we read this chapter, we found ourselves interrogating our own practices and policies about time—how would a writing center without schedules work, what could we do to make time a centerpiece of training in a way that honored learning and teaching rather than parceling it out as a commodity, how might we change out policies to give writers better time? Conventional wisdom is being challenged in this chapter in ways that might affect the long-standing practice of our centers. What greater influence can a book engender?

The Everyday Writing Center reads like a series of overlapping waves. Each individual chapter builds on the other and adds something new. In Chapter four, “Origami Anyone: Tutors as Learners,” the writers focus on *communities of practice*, a key term introduced very early in the text. They enhance their discussion with a new key concept: the *learning community*. “Origami Anyone” asks writing center workers to transform their centers with new perspectives and new frames. Here again, we see the familiar call to embrace ambiguity and cognitive dissonance. They ask that we, through staff education, “design activities and intellectual challenges that get tutors to look at their everyday experiences differently” (48). Through these various activities, tutors learn from and challenge one another. The writers offer heuristics and examples without being prescriptive. They are quick to point out that prescription leads to the five-paragraph-essay-writing-center-session: “rote, repetitive, with little room for fresh insight or complicated connections” (64). Staff education is a significant focus for the writing center administrator, and so we appreciated the chapter’s discussion of multiple and diverse projects that promote a culture of learning.

In “Straighten Up and Fly Right: Writers as Tutors and Tutors as Writers” (Chapter five), the authors present a view of tutors as primarily writers, a role that we often undercut in the press of everyday concerns. We tend to stress their teaching roles and neglect nurturing their writerly habits. But it’s important to highlight tutors as writers and creators: they are not just people who help with writing. The National Writing Project has advocated since its inception that the best teachers of writing are writers themselves. (Remember Donald Murray’s *A Writer Teaches Writing*, which so influenced that movement?). While tutors are not teachers, they are nonetheless partners in writing instruction, and if the best teachers are writers it makes sense that the best tutors are as well. As chapter five emphasizes, the social nature of writing fosters a culture of learning and a community of practice in which tutors interrogate and discuss their everyday writing choices and how these choices are informed by and affect the world. If we make writing an explicit part of our staff education, our writing centers will be, as the co-authors attest, deeply affected.

Chapter six does a fine job of wedding the everyday to the abstract through the issue of “Everyday Racism,” while making a courageous argument for us to act as institutional leaders. This is a prime example of how the book challenges us to confront the hard stuff. For those of us who work at colleges and universities where there are very few students and faculty of color, where race seems invisible, where no one has to directly confront it, the chapter boldly highlights the insidious nature of institutional racism. Even an apparently small step such as diversifying our staffs can be blocked by our atti-

tudes, although we may not even recognize the racism inherent in our attempts to hire, for example, only Honors students. Yet the challenge can be daunting and the risks are greater than the chapter warns. For people of color and whites alike, challenging racism is often accompanied by name calling, anger, shunning. Before you make a public challenge, gather allies and be secure in your stand. It is worth it, but it can change your career, and not always in a way that will make you a hero.

Chapter seven, “Everyday Administration, or Are We Having Fun yet?” is perhaps the most fun chapter of all in its hopeful outlook and call to establish a “leaderful institutional culture.” This is, in fact, a safer path to confronting racism, one more likely to be productive. Taking up the call for a “scholarship of administration” (115), they challenge us to bring our scholarship to the table, to act out as the leaders we are (not those we think administration wants us to be), and to be mindful of our power. In this challenge is an implicit undermining of how our educational institutions often position students as commodities, as powerless, as voiceless. While some of us believe we should use rhetoric to gain the resources we need from administration, even if that means translating our work into terms the institution understands (FTE’s, retention, graduation rates), *The Everyday Writing Center* suggests this places us too near the role of traitor. Here is where Trickster breaks down for the authors—Trickster has no trouble with the traitor role and would embrace it to meet his/her ends, but our authors want Trickster to simply prick our conscience in this case, to remind us to speak up for our causes in our own voices. “Don’t Be Afraid” (123), they say, to “enact our values across our institution” (124). Our leadership matters, and no one can marginalize the effect we can have if we embrace it.

The Everyday Writing Center addresses the many long-standing concerns of writing center professionals, but as we were reading together, some questions surfaced. While we appreciated the scholarship in the book, we wondered if readers will reify it—will know where those theorists from outside their discipline fit within their own disciplinary contexts and how those individual contexts affect the impact of *The Everyday Writing Center*. Indeed, is *The Everyday Writing Center* a book which can be appreciated by those who are brand new to writing centers? We think it might be a text more appreciated by the somewhat seasoned professional. Our community of practice does share many assumptions worth investigating, yet the very act of composing a book about it reifies it. We are not suggesting that we retreat into the too-often used mantra that all writing centers are unique and thus generalizations must be avoided. But we ought to remember as we read to apply the time-honored rule, “if the shoe fits, wear it.” Is yours a writing center run by people who are worried about catering to those bean counters? Are the administrators at your institution bean counters who value something else over student learning? We daresay many of us, though we use tutor training books, don’t live by them or run our writing centers too rigidly. While we admit we sometimes do get too caught up in the everyday to notice opportunity, and we are slow to change, and we do rely on established community practices, we also play, challenge, revise, and question. Now, thanks to this book, we’ll do so with greater awareness of the value of disruption, greater joy in the process, and with more attention to the Trickster on our shoulder. ♦

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SUSAN M. DINITZ RECEIVES 2007 NCPTW MAXWELL AWARD

Dr. Susan M. Dinitz, Writing Center Coordinator at the University of Vermont, won the 2007 Ron Maxwell Award for Distinguished Leadership in Promoting the Collaborative Learning Practices of Peer Tutors in Writing. The award was presented by 2006 award winner Michele Eodice on October 20th at the 24th annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW) hosted by Penn State University in University Park, PA.

The award recognizes a professional within the NCPTW organization for dedication to and leadership in collaborative learning in writing centers, for aiding students in together taking on more responsibility for their learning, and, thus, for promoting the work of peer tutors. Its presentation also denotes extraordinary service to the evolution of the conference organization.

The plaque Dinitz received bears a quote of her choosing from Muriel Harris: “. . . as we turn our attention to the work of the tutor, we become increasingly aware that writing instruction without a writing center is only a partial program” (“Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors,” *College English* 57 [1995]: 472).

The NCPTW theme this year of celebrating history was especially fitting for Dinitz because 2007 marks the 25th anniversary of UVM’s Writing Center. Dinitz began coordinating the Writing Center the year after it was founded, from 1983 to 1989 and again from 1998 to the present. Throughout the past 25 years, she has collaborated closely with her partner in the dance of writing center discourse, Jean Kiedaisch, the recently retired Director of Academic Support Programs at UVM, who received the Maxwell Award in the year 2000.

Congratulations to Dr. Dinitz and to the University of Vermont.

TAKE NOTE

UIC WRITING CENTER AND PUBLIC SPACE CONFERENCE

Call for Proposals
Feb. 29-March 1, 2008
Chicago, IL
*“Race in the Writing
Center: Towards New
Theory and Praxis”*

We are seeking new and exciting work that explores the relationship between writing, race, tutoring, and writing center spaces and practices. During the conference, there will also be a meeting for representatives of writing centers from the Urban-13 universities. Several travel stipends will be available for students from these universities.

250-word proposals (100-word for roundtables) are due December 17, 2007. Panel proposals should include panel title, description of panel theme, name of chair, one-page abstracts of each paper, and contact information for each presenter. Conference Web site: <<http://www.uic.edu/depts/engl/writing/>>.

Please mail or e-mail conference proposals to:

The UIC Writing Center
Vainis Aleksa
University of Illinois at Chicago
(MC 162)
Chicago, Illinois 60607
or
raceinwritingcenter@gmail.com

INSTRUCTORS TUTORING THEIR OWN STUDENTS IN THE WRITING CENTER: A CONFLICT OF INTEREST?

Jennifer Jefferson
Endicott College
Beverly, MA

At many institutions, masters and doctoral candidates in English staff the Writing Center. Because of who the tutors are, writing center policy may specify that tutors do not work with students who are enrolled in their own classes. On a practical level, such a procedure keeps instructor-tutors from using the writing center as a substitute for office hours and, in turn, prevents them from being inundated with their own students, to the exclusion of other students. Aside from these issues, however, what are the implications of instructors tutoring their own students in a writing center?

At Endicott College, where I work as the writing center coordinator, we do not yet have such a policy in place, at least not formally. The Endicott Writing Center, which serves a student body of approximately 1,700 full-time undergraduates and several hundred adult undergraduates and graduates, is staffed by professional and peer tutors. Many of the professional tutors teach as part- or full-time faculty at the college, and the professional tutors have occasionally tutored their own students in the Writing Center. This tutoring has not, to my knowledge, elicited complaints from students or faculty. But despite this seeming lack of complications, I've been thinking a lot about whether faculty tutoring their own students undercuts the Writing Center's purpose.

Many writing centers, including ours, face an ongoing struggle to clearly articulate their philosophy to students and faculty alike. First, the writing center is a place separate from the classroom, but linked to it. Second, in the writing center, student writers should be the ultimate authorities on their own writing and in the choices they make in that writing. Third—and this can be the most difficult idea to convey to the college community—the writing center is a place that serves writers over and above their instructors. Each of these writing center foundations has the potential to be undermined by instructors doubling as their own students' tutors, both because of how such a rhetorical situation is being framed and because of issues of authority. The dangers here lie not just in how student writers perceive the situation, but also in how the instructor-tutors and the institution as a whole perceive the writing center's role.

When the tutors whom writers come to visit turn out to be their instructors themselves, the concept of the writing center being separate from the classroom can be obscured. Students and instructor-tutors can easily fall into known roles without re-imagining these roles in the context of the writing center. In this relationship, the student/instructor conference that usually takes place in the classroom or the faculty office may just shift to the writing center. If the center conference is an interaction that hasn't been clearly defined, such a conflation of the tutor/instructor roles has the power to reinforce notions of tutors being authorities. Although a number of factors—age, race, gender, professional or peer status of the tutor and tutee—are always at play in these relationships, the tutor *being* the instructor changes these further. The duality of the instructor-tutor puts the tutor in a definite position of authority, for the tutor is now the one giving the grade. No matter the level of comfort and amiability that students and instructors might share, instructor authority exists in a way that it doesn't with any other tutors, peer or professional.

A student who comes to talk to an instructor about a piece of writing cannot but be acutely aware of the fact that the instructor will issue the final grade. Even when a student does not ask the explicit “grade” question, it remains. Stephen North emphasizes the distinction between the in-class writing conference and the writing center conference in his seminal “The Idea of a Writing Center.” He writes, “working in both situations makes us acutely aware of crucial differences between talking about writing in the context of a class, and talking about it in the context of the center. When we hold student conferences in our classes, we are the teacher, in the writers’ minds especially, the assigner and evaluator of the writing in question” (41). It is critical to note here North’s emphasis on how the student perceives the instructor in the situation of student/instructor conference: as the grader. Is it likely, then, that the roles of instructor and student would shift considerably when the conference is removed from the classroom or faculty office and placed in the context of the writing center, a space that often struggles to define its purpose to students and instructors alike? When the nature of the relationship between tutor and tutee does not change, the nature of the discussion will likely not change much, either. Such role shifting is less likely to take place in the writing center when an unequal relationship has already been established in the classroom.

Again in “The Idea of a Writing Center,” referring to the role of tutor and assuming the tutor is not the instructor, North writes, “we [the writing tutor] are not the teacher. We did not assign the writing, and we will not grade it. However little that distinction might mean in our behaviors, it seems to mean plenty to the writers” (42). It does mean plenty to the writers: it removes the tutor’s authority, puts the tutor in the position of someone who is experienced talking about writing, but who won’t ultimately judge the writer for the choices he or she makes. The tutor is there to act as a sounding board, a guide, someone who can discuss the possible effects on a reader of different composing choices. This is an ideal rhetorical situation for a tutor and a student: the tutor does not hold, either explicitly or implicitly, the threat or possibility of a grade over the student’s head. He or she is in a position to help the student understand how writing is about who the audience is, what it expects, and how it will respond, rather than about absolute or “objective” right and wrong.

What is interesting to think about in the situation just outlined is not only how the student’s perception of the situation changes, but also how the instructor-tutor’s perception of self and role does or does not change when the conference shifts from the classroom or faculty office to the writing center, a supposedly neutral space. North indicates that the “distinction [between tutor and instructor] might mean [little] in our behaviors” (42), but, I’d like to argue, such a distinction has the potential to alter our behaviors as much as those of our students. We interact differently with our students than with others’ students. We feel the authority more, we know what we’re “looking for” from a particular assignment, we know the students’ history in our class, we know the grades we have given them. And there is that inevitable pressure to talk about the aspects of the writing that we, as the instructors, will deem most important when it comes time to grade. As much as we may want these interactions to change when we move them to the writing center, the reality of the student/instructor relationship changes little. As a result, the rhetorical experience possible in the writing center becomes even harder to achieve.

Ideally, tutors can offer an audience beyond that of graders. Tutors are real readers in real contexts, people who, despite the authority they may have by virtue of being instructors, older than students, or peers with significant writing and tutoring experience, are still not the graders. Approaching the writing from the standpoint of generally well-educated readers, although ones who might not know much about the topic at hand, tutors can offer alternate perspectives; they can help highlight for students how an

ANNOUNCEMENTS

WRITING CENTER MANAGER FREDERICK COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The Writing Center Manager's responsibilities include but are not limited to the following: Development, coordination, and supervision of FCC's Writing Center. Promoting Writing Center resources to students, faculty, and staff. Managing the Writing Center's budget. Teaching one writing class per year. Assisting the Associate Vice President for The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and other CTL staff with projects and duties related to the Writing Center's function in supporting FCC's and CTL's missions and goals.

Minimum Required Qualifications:

Education: Master's degree in English or related field. **Experience:** 2 years supervisory/management experience; experience with instructing and tutoring students in writing using educational and related information technologies.

Closing Date: Open Until Filled.

Required Applicant Documents:

Resume; Cover Letter

<[https://jobs.frederick.edu/](https://jobs.frederick.edu/applicants/jsp/shared/frameset/frameset.jsp?time=1194228861242)

[applicants/jsp/shared/frameset/frameset.jsp?time=1194228861242](https://jobs.frederick.edu/applicants/jsp/shared/frameset/frameset.jsp?time=1194228861242)>.

outside person might read. Unlike instructors, who have frequently read or are familiar with the material discussed in student papers, third party tutors often truly don't understand, when asking for idea clarification, what writers are getting at. Tutors don't have to pretend that they as readers don't "get" something—in all likelihood, the tutors will not have read the text or sources at hand. Seeing readers struggle with texts they have created helps writers understand where their drafts need additional work. For instance, if a writer observes a tutor struggling to follow how ideas connect to one another within her paper, she perhaps gains a more honest, real-world sense of how her writing speaks (or fails to speak) to readers. This student-tutor interaction also reinforces ideas about the importance of audience and the contextual roles of readers and writers. Outside readers/tutors can give students an idea of the range of rhetorical choices available and help them to understand their ultimate audience, while not actually being that audience.

When student writers see how outside tutors respond differently to their work than their own instructors do, this may highlight for them the subjectivity of literate activities. It may also convince students that revising a piece of writing isn't primarily about editing, but rather about working on the larger-level ideas. When editing sentence-level prose is appropriate, writers will also, perhaps, be able to see more easily how and why sentence-level changes would help clarify something for readers. In contrast, working with their own instructors on these matters too often becomes wanting to "fix mistakes" to avoid "losing points." Instructor-tutors also benefit from a separation of their roles when it comes to these rhetorical issues. In being removed from the position of "the" reader, instructors can better assume the position of "a" reader, further underscoring the subjectivity of any reading experience. Perhaps most importantly, the relatively impartial third party tutor situation indicates to writers that instructors are not absolute authorities, that other readers may interpret texts differently and in equally valid ways.

But what about what students want? If the writing center is a place that's meant to be student-centered, and if students want to work with their own instructors when they arrive, shouldn't they be able to do so? As Carol-Ann Farkas notes in a recent *Writing Lab Newsletter* article, often students want to talk with their own instructors, rather than with other writing tutors, precisely for some of the reasons outlined above. That is, students are looking for a right/wrong answer, for feedback that will definitively help them improve their paper, with "improve" meaning "improve the grade." Farkas writes,

We [instructors and tutors] all understand that feedback from varying sources can be helpful, while at the same time, what matters is for the student to find her own voice, her own ideas. But our students, so worried about GPA, and so steeped in an outcomes-oriented culture, may feel they can't afford to mess around with ideals: they want to do it "right" or not at all, and right is what the instructor—the one with the A's and the F's—says. (3)

What such a desire "to do it 'right' or not at all" takes away from students is the chance to escape from the right/wrong mentality, to see writing as inherently subjective and audience-dependent. However, maybe we underestimate students. Perhaps it is because they are already audience-savvy that they know that what one tutor's definition of "good" is might not be another's. We must encourage students to take risks on their grades, to consider the insights of outside readers to better examine their own texts and the effects they might have on other (grading) audiences. Although doing so might not benefit students' GPAs as much as would talking with their own instructors, in the long run students will become more attuned to and skillful at adapting to different audiences. (And, it's likely that students who desperately want their instructors' feedback, and who ask for such feedback in advance, will also be able to access it on some level through the more appropriate venue of faculty office hours. In this way, writing centers and faculty can work hand-in-hand to offer student writers feedback from multiple perspectives.)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

Requisition No. 75167

Job Category: Professional
& Administrative

Department: Y1E07- Provost's Office

Position Description: Performs varied and complex administrative duties in the management and coordination of a large specialized project and/or program. Requires independent judgment and application of established policies and procedures. Works under general supervision with evaluation based on overall results obtained.

Major/Essential Functions: The Assistant Director will coordinate with the Director to train, supervise, and evaluate tutors and student assistants, facilitate writing workshops and other campus writing activities, and oversee the daily operations of the on-site and online UWC.

Qualifications: Bachelor's degree in the area of specialization or closely related field. Three years of related administrative and technical experience. Additional job-related education may be substituted for the required experience on a year-for-year basis. **Preferred Qualifications:** Master's degree in Composition/Rhetoric, English, or a related area, two years tutoring experience, and two years supervisory experience. Excellent written and oral communication skills.

Please attach a resume, cover letter and a list of references when applying for this position. To learn more about this position, please log on to the Web site: <<http://jobs.texas-tech.edu/>>, and enter requisition number 75167.

The conversations that take place between tutors and tutees have the potential to be more philosophically aligned with the work of the writing center when there isn't the further complication of tutors *being* the instructors. When we look back to the commonly held writing center philosophies laid out at the beginning of this article, it becomes clear that instructors doubling as their students' tutors has the potential to undermine the strength of each role. First, with instructors doubling as tutors, the distance between the classroom and the writing center collapses, which may cause both students and instructor-tutors to conflate the two spaces and their own roles. Second, instructors' presence may take writers' focus away from the writing center as a place to come to discuss writing, rather than grades. When instructors tutor their own students, discussions about writing will likely focus even more on grades than is typical in the writing center, and not stand as great a chance of evolving into something more. Third, when instructors—rather than more neutral third parties—tutor, students may lose some authority over their own writing. Even in the most democratic of instructor-student relationships, instructors, as the ultimate dispensers of grades, hold the final authority. It takes a plucky student to refuse a strongly suggested instructor revision. With more neutral tutors, however, students must truly make that final decision about a given revision on their own. Lastly, if the writing center is to be a place that serves writers, it follows that instructors, whose self-interest necessarily factors into any interaction with their own students, cannot tutor these students.

All of this is not to say, however, that instructors tutoring their own students can, or even should, always be avoided. I have not considered in this article the possibility of instructors tutoring their own students about writing assignments for other classes. Although issues of authority remain in such cases, they are significantly lessened. It may even be beneficial for students to see that other instructors interpret an assignment in additional ways or look for different qualities in a response—that “right” and “wrong” in writing have so much to do with audience, and that there is no such thing as a “universal” standard of “good writing” to which all instructors are privy and with which they agree. These issues notwithstanding, I nevertheless think we should tread cautiously when it comes to tutoring our own students in the writing center. How students, tutors, instructors, and the institution as a whole view the writing center and the work it does may be impacted by our choosing, or refusing, to play such dual, and potentially conflicting, roles. ♦

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TUTOR'S COLUMN

TEARS OF A TUTEE

◆Lauren Bisson
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Findlay, OH

Starting out as a writing tutor, I was afraid of everything. Having some control over students' papers (and possibly their grades) terrified me. In the beginning, however, I was worried about things like comma splices and thesis development. It was not until the director of our writing center burst into tears and buried her face in her hands that I realized there was more to being a tutor than subject verb agreement. Many tutors are adequately prepared for emotional outbursts such as anger, but uncontrolled sobbing is a touchy subject for both tutors and students alike.

There are several human responses to crying, many of which are unsuitable for a tutor. It would not be appropriate for the tutor to laugh nervously, become irritated with the distressed student, or begin sobbing hysterically themselves. A lot of work has been done to help tutors deal with angry students, but I have found almost no research has been done to help tutors deal with extremely sad students.

What are we as tutors supposed to do when a student bursts into tears in the lab? Do we rub the student's back and hand them a mug of warm milk and a handkerchief? Or do we tell them to 'suck it up' and get on with their paper? In order to attempt to find an answer to these questions, I asked a variety of people around the campus of the University of Findlay in Findlay, Ohio. Although these students are people that I know well enough to ask them such a personal question, I asked students from a variety of different clubs and different lifestyles. Findlay is a reasonably small private school with a certain Midwestern charm, although it has one of the highest minority percentages in the country. This allowed me to talk to a variety of people from several different countries.

I asked students of the University of Findlay both what they would do as a tutor if one of their students began to cry during the session, and what they would like to have done if they were the crying student. Generally people responded with the same actions whether they were thinking as the student or the tutor, however some people switched after they thought about it. One young woman said that as a tutor, she would try to find out what was wrong and comfort the student. But when asked about what she would want the tutor to do if she was the one crying, she wanted to be left alone so she would not feel embarrassed.

Most of the males I talked to would leave their student alone if they cried, as they would want to be left alone if they were crying. They did not feel as if the tutor was 'running out on them' if the tutor abandoned them amidst their sobs. Instead, the students felt that the tutor was not respecting their privacy if the tutor stayed while the student was crying.

By the same token, many females would stay with their student if they were crying. They all felt compelled to help their student with their problems. Also, if they were the student crying, they wanted the tutor to ask them what was wrong. As one female student at Findlay stated "I like to talk about myself. Also, if I'm really having a problem with a paper, the tutor might help me feel better about it and myself as a writer."

However, the tutor cannot classify 'people I should leave alone' as men, and 'people I should offer condolence' as women. One young man who recently graduated from the University of Findlay is the son of two psychologists, which might have influenced his answer. If he were in a situation where he was being tutored and he began to cry, he would want the tutor to "ask me why I was crying, and listen and care." If he were tutoring a student, he would ask the student what was wrong and if there was anything he could do, regardless of what the problem was. He felt that even if the student's emotional issues had nothing to do with the paper, it was his responsibility as a fellow human being to help the student in any way possible.

In my tutoring class, we were told that since we are writing tutors and not counselors, it is not our responsibility as writing tutors to help students with boyfriend or girlfriend issues, or family problems. Students might want to talk about themselves, but it is not our job as tutors to help them. There are qualified professional counselors usually only a short walk away from the writing lab.

This extends the question to not only what the student wants the tutor to do, but what tutors should do so they are not breaking rules of the writing lab or overstepping the bounds of the tutor-student relationship. A few males, when answering my questions, advised me to hug all crying male students very closely to comfort them. As this was said with quite a mischievous glint in their eye, it also brings to light another problem associated with crying students. Some students may be crying crocodile tears to get attention or affection from their tutor. One young woman told me that she usually cried in front of other people to get the reaction that she wanted. If she was in a writing tutoring session, for example, she would cry because the tutor would then assure her that her writing was good. "When you cry in front of professors," says the young woman, a third-year student of the University of Findlay, "They usually just wait for you to finish. But when you cry about school in front of peers, they usually forgive you for whatever you are doing wrong." Although I doubt many students use crying to manipulate positive responses out of their tutors, it is still something to look out for. As for crying for attention of the opposite sex, I suppose it is something the tutor has to determine in each specific situation. The tutor should not respond in any way that would fuel the student's begging for attention. Physical contact and promises to help students with their papers outside of the writing center are not good ways to stop students from crying, especially when they are simply trying to get a date.

After talking to students around the University of Findlay campus, we can see that crying is not a situation with one correct answer. Students have as many different reasons to cry in front of a tutor as there are ways of helping them. However, there is a sort of 'foolproof' way to find out what the student would want the tutor to do. If the student begins to cry, the tutor could simply ask the student whether they want to talk about their problem, or if the tutor should give them a few minutes alone. Students who really want to be alone while they cry will not shy away from telling you to leave. Whereas students who either want attention or think you could help sort out their problems will ask you to stay. That way you will not bother a student who wants privacy or run out on a student who needs comfort. I offered this solution to one of my tutees at the time, and he thought that the question would keep the tutor from offending any type of person. At the same time, this question could shut down any romantic hopes that the student might be having, since he now has two choices, neither of which include going to the movie theatre. The best method, in my opinion, is to simply ask a student what he or she wants you to do as a tutor. Just remember that as writing tutors, it is not our job to counsel students through rough patches in their lives. We might help organize paragraphs, but we are not necessarily qualified to organize students' lives. ♦

CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

Feb. 7-9, 2008: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Savannah, GA

Contact: Deborah H. Reese: reesedeb@mail.armstrong.edu; 912-921-2329. Conference Web site: <<http://www.llp.armstrong.edu/swca/swca2008cfp.html>>.

Feb. 14, 2008: University of the Western Cape, in Capetown, SA

Contact: Fatima Slemming at fslemming@uwc.ac.za or Margaret Robyn at mrobyn@uwc.ac.za.

March 6-8, 2007: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Norman OK

Contact: Michele Eodice at meodice@ou.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://www.ou.edu/writingcenter/scwca08>>.

April 11-12, 2008: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Columbus, OH

Contact: Doug Dangler: dangler.6@osu.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://www.ecwca.org>>.

April 12, 2008: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Philadelphia, PA

Contact: Lori Salem: lori.salem@temple.edu or Dan Gallagher: dagallag@temple.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://faculty.mc3.edu/hhalbert/MAWCA/2008/CFP.html>>.

April 12-13, 2008: NorthEast Writing Centers Association, in Burlington, VT

Contact: Michelle Cox: michelle.cox@bridgew.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://www.newca-conference.com/>>.

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

Contact: Gerd Braeuer at 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: Charlene Hirschi: chirschi@english.usu.edu or Claire Hughes: clairehughes@weber.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://departments.weber.edu/writingcenter/IWCA.htm>>.



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