

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 32, Number 8

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

April, 2008

— FROM THE EDITOR —

When the *Writing Lab Newsletter* was being re-designed awhile back, I asked the designer to keep the pages open and clean, with a lot of unused breathing space. And it's been my attempt to keep issues looking that way, with ample margins to write notes in or just to keep the uncluttered look. But April is not a month where that's easily adhered to. There are numerous job announcements, conference announcements, and news of plans for a new writing center directory. So, please excuse what is an unduly crowded issue.

Amidst all the announcements, you'll find Kathleen Welsch's article on how we can offer numerous professional experiences and skills to tutors to enhance their own education as well as their career opportunities. Then Paula Gillespie, Paul Heidebrecht, and Lorelle Lamascus discuss a new program at Marquette University for the writing center to train grad students in other disciplines to return to their departments to assist with writing.

Jeanne Smith reviews Bill Macauley and Nick Mauriello's *Marginal Words, Marginal Works?*, the winner of the 2007 IWCA scholarship award for the best book of the year. To conclude this issue, J. Tremblay reflects on how he managed as an older tutor to connect with the students he was tutoring.

A crowded issue, but in a more positive light, I hope, an issue packed with worthwhile reading.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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SHAPING CAREERS IN THE WRITING CENTER

◆ Kathleen Welsch
(Clarion University of PA, Clarion, PA)

A writing center's mission is to assist student writers. Our mantra is "make better writers not better papers." No matter how small the lesson, we pride ourselves in assisting students to generate ideas, improve basic skills, organize effectively, develop sophistication in style and thoughtfulness in content. In short, we aim to foster a writer's confidence.

But what of those individuals who work in the writing center—primarily our student staff members? How does the writing center benefit them? Whether in books, journal articles, conference presentations or training sessions, our focus is generally consumed with the development of our staff as writing consultants. Always, writing center directors are looking to offer new tutorial strategies, training methods, and insights into how to work with various student populations. We are expert at training our student staff to respond to their peers with that fine combination of expertise and empathy.

And yet—as valuable as that experience is, how might a writing center offer student staff still more in the way of professional development and personal growth? What skills might they develop; what professional responsibilities might they practice; what experiences might provide them with a marketable edge elsewhere? Rather than think of their work in the writing center as

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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.

limited to the time they spend working under our supervision, how might we help them see their position as more than a work/study job that helps pay for books, or a graduate assistantship that offers tuition remission—that it has something to teach them about being professionals no matter what their major or chosen career path?

Within the context of these questions, my purpose is to examine how writing centers contribute to the professional learning experience of our student staff. Experience in administration, public relations, client relations, writing, and personal professional development are the five areas of focus. But I encourage readers to imagine still other opportunities by considering the possibilities in their own centers.

ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

The most common model for administrative experience for graduate students is a position as assistant director. However, depending on the size and resources of a writing center, other models might be more effective and appropriate to provide this type of learning experience. In the case of a small complement of graduate assistants (GAs), a team approach might be more effective; or in situations where a center employs only a few GAs, specific support of/or collaboration with the director might be the better mode.

Teaching GAs something of administrative duties requires identifying those tasks that can be performed by GAs and which reveal the hidden part of an administrator's job—work that supports and maintains the smooth operation of a center but which few others see: creating staff schedules; maintaining center user statistics and producing reports on request; logging tutorial hours of staff (if one offers a tutor certification program) and producing reports on request; editing a newsletter; compiling end of term student evaluation results and producing a report; managing office supplies and resources. Such responsibilities can be distributed among the GAs so they all have the opportunity to learn about administrative work.

The English M.A. program at my university is small, and not all of our English GAs are invested in composition nor interested in being an assistant director. Most years, graduate students in library science, communication, speech pathology, and the M.B.A. program fill any remaining positions. For these reasons, I have opted for an administrative team model wherein various duties are distributed among the GAs. Administrative responsibilities are rotated in the second year of a GA appointment to broaden the experience. In addition, GAs also have the option to accept or decline additional opportunities, such as presenting classroom workshops, creating instructional materials, presenting at conferences, and training new staff. This last option is offered to returning GAs who have valuable experience to offer new staff members and who would benefit from working with me on how to plan and present a staff training session.

GAs can also be encouraged to practice areas of expertise related to their specific discipline. For example, we have had library science GAs who have led staff training or classroom workshops on issues like database searches, annotated bibliographies, and computer technology, and English GAs who have become the designated “go-to” person for grammar or offer ESL training and support for fellow consultants.

The opportunity to share in this work prepares GAs from various disciplines for future professional situations. Heather, for example, came to the writing center imagining a future as a library technology specialist who would spend her days tucked away in a library basement. By the end of her GA appointment in the writing center, her goal was to pursue a position running a learning center. Other GAs have had similar positive administrative experiences. Maria, who was in the M.B.A. program,

currently works for an economic community development program where she assesses training needs for area businesses, then plans and facilitates training workshops. Gina, who focused all of her English M.A. course work on ESL issues and who assisted in ESL training and created instructional materials, is teaching in a university ESL program and was the program's interim director for a year.

PUBLIC RELATIONS EXPERIENCE

Because both GAs and undergraduate staff members can come from a range of disciplines, they have the advantage of seeing a writing center through the filter of their discipline, as well as through their interactions with fellow majors. Their varied perspectives can be tapped not only for creative ways to promote a writing center, but for the purpose of teaching them about the intricacies of producing a public message designed to meet diverse audiences. Whether it's producing bookmarkers and brochures, planning special events, or promoting specific workshops, all such activities teach students the how-to's of producing a public message.

Our biggest public relations project has been the creation of posters advertising writing center services to various disciplines. Producing a poster advertising writing center services, for example in the math department, required them to think of an appropriate image as well a discipline specific slogan that would be appreciated by that audience. By creatively considering the concerns and interests of specific audiences, the entire staff learned a great deal about producing an effective message. Plus, they had a good bit of fun in the process. Such experience prepared a student like Amanda for her current work as a residence life manager at a small private college, where she is regularly engaged in promoting events and services for students.

Learning to write non-academic prose by producing a newsletter is a particularly challenging lesson for students. They are so accustomed to writing lengthy academic papers that making the transition to concise, precise, focused newsletter text is sometimes a painful but valuable process. The staff has been fortunate to have a university publications manager who generously reads their copy and provides valuable feedback about how to do this type of writing. While the process may be painful at times, staff members benefit in the long run. Just this summer, an undergrad landed a full-time, paid newspaper internship based on the quality of his newsletter clips, and a GA landed stringer work in similar fashion.

Writing center Web sites offer still another learning opportunity for those staff members with web expertise. Whether it entails something as basic as maintaining the staff web page, or more complex tasks such as designing new pages or adding multi-media features, this work can be cited on a resume. A senior communication major and second year writing consultant updated the entire look of our Web site as her project for a Web design course she was taking. Of course, she did this in consultation with the "client"—which was me as writing center director—and with the support of another faculty member with Web design expertise.

“Creating a focus on the professional development of one's staff not only benefits individual staff members; it can also benefit the writing center itself when administrators are making budget decisions.”

This same student approached me in her first year as a consultant with an idea for a writing center PR “blitz.” She wanted to heighten awareness about the writing center in an eye-catching and “tasteful” way. She designed two different messages—one for students and one for faculty—that relied on puns about candy. Messages were distributed in campus mailboxes, and each one came with a piece of the candy carefully attached to it. One student message, for example, had a “Smartie” attached to it and read: “Writing deadline? Be SMART about it. Start early with assistance at The Writing Center.”

ANNOUNCEMENTS

ESL Specialist in the Writing Center University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill invites applications for the position of English as a Second Language Specialist. This is a full-time, non-tenure track position in an innovative, busy center that offers both onsite and online writing support (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/>). The Center serves thousands of students each year with a staff of 16 graduate student consultants. The ESL Specialist will collaborate with the Center's existing ESL Specialist to design and deliver instruction in academic English language, communication, and culture. Duties include:

- * Develop and teach weekly instructional modules with separate instructional tracks for undergraduate and graduate ESL students
- * Tutor ESL post-docs, faculty, and graduate and undergraduate students
- * Facilitate ESL writing groups
- * Collaborate with colleagues on special projects

QUALIFICATIONS

Minimum qualifications include a Master's degree in TESOL, Linguistics, Foreign Language Education, or related field (Ph.D. preferred); ESL teaching experience at the college level or equivalent. Demonstrated skill teaching English for academic purposes and experience teaching advanced-level intensive English language courses are advantages.

TO APPLY:

Send CV and cover letter to Dr. Kim Abels, Campus Box 5137, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-5137. Review of applications began on February 1, 2008, and will continue until filled. Position start date is July 1, 2008. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is an equal opportunity employer.

Although I worked with her on the project by providing supervision and the materials she needed, she was responsible for devising a cost-effective plan, producing the message, delegating aspects of the project to fellow staff members, organizing the mailing, and delivering it to the university mailroom.

Even the bulletin board in a writing center offers a PR opportunity for a motivated staff member. One year a special education major took charge of the bulletin board, presenting a new writing message or lesson every other month. She made sure to take photos of each to include in her professional portfolio.

CLIENT RELATIONS EXPERIENCE

To name the primary work of writing center consultants as simply tutorial or one-on-one consulting in no way accurately defines the range of expertise they develop. Every consultation requires a complex range of skills from knowing the in's and out's of writing, establishing rapport and creating a plan to suit writer and project, to reading body language, building confidence, and managing time effectively. The clientele and their requests are no less complex as they range from first-year writers to graduate students, ESL students to returning adults, and philosophy arguments to graduate theses. Consultants learn to explain rhetorical principles, offer constructive feedback, and ease tense situations. For anyone to define a writing consultant as "simply" a "tutor" is a gross understatement. It obscures the professional expectations the position demands.

Besides honing consultants' abilities to address traditional writing concerns (thesis development, ESL techniques, etc.), training sessions can also incorporate preparation for more non-traditional consultant services. By expanding a center's services in new directions, we can create win-win situations: students' writing needs are met in alternative ways and consultants develop their professional experience in new directions. If a center offers a computerized classroom environment for writing courses, consultants can assist in classes in numerous ways: providing computer-assisted feedback as directed by the course instructor; facilitating small group critiques; assisting with database searches; presenting a specific writing workshop (i.e. MLA/APA documentation style); or providing support to faculty members learning to incorporate writing center time into their FYC classes.

Consultants might also be called upon to devise instructional materials in the form of handouts to be used in consultations. We have over 65 handouts created in direct response to staff needs in tutorial situations. The process usually looks like this: Consultant: "I had a student today who was really struggling with active and passive voice. I could have used a good handout to help me explain the difference." WC Director: "That's a great idea. Would you be willing to work on creating one with my assistance?" The creation of such material is great for education majors to include in their professional portfolios.

Outreach projects to specific clientele who would not otherwise access writing center services provide new experiences for consultants, as well as build good will toward a center in its university and local community. Such projects include the more typical workshops which target specific writing concerns/difficulties, and the not so typical: preparing education majors to take the 30-minute, timed essay portion of the state Praxis I exam needed for certification. Projects may be focused on campus, like spending an evening a week assisting football players during their team study table hours, or off campus, like conducting a special writing project with students at an area school.

The complexity of a writing consultant's primary responsibility of consulting with student writers more than prepares her/him with a solid foundation for a number of professional challenges. Secondary Education English majors are more than ready to take on student teaching assignments or full-time positions. Unlike many of their peers who haven't had a similar experience, they can make the case that

they are the best candidates to teach high school writing because they are so intimately acquainted with college-level writing demands. As one student explained upon recently being hired to teach, "I'm not sure if we [he and another former writing consultant] would have had this opportunity without our Writing Center experience. Natalie and I were only a handful of students hired directly out of college—and I think the clincher was the Writing Center."

Special education majors can make the case that they can work with a range of students and devise an individualized plan to meet their needs. Speech pathology students, who will spend their careers working one-to-one with clients, come away better prepared to address a variety of language issues, explicitly teach details of the English language without using jargon, write reports that are non-evaluative or judgmental, and conduct small group therapy in a school setting. Rob, an English M.A. student who provided support to faculty members learning to incorporate writing center technology into their FYC classes, is now teaching FYC and incorporating writing center computer-assisted-instruction time into his pedagogy.

Those students not planning a career in education also develop valuable skills that transfer to their field of choice. Pre-law students develop strong research skills, the capacity to think quickly on their feet, and the ability to formulate a variety of solutions to a particular problem. Students planning a career in technical writing and editing possess a solid knowledge of grammar and syntax, as well as experience collaborating with other writers. A communication major with plans to pursue a public relations career in crisis management leaves with the ability to work quickly and calmly with fellow employees and clients to solve problems. A psychology major, meanwhile, may value working with clients because it also helps her develop careful listening skills and the ability to empathize with the client's perspective; whereas, a business major may value the experience for the opportunity to practice devising action plans and managing client time effectively.

An English major who graduated this past spring just landed her first job as an academic admissions advisor at an English language school in Boston. Even though she's never held such a position, she felt confident applying for it. Her excited e-mail read: "I REALLY think my W.C. skills helped me land the phone call. . . . [their] goal is to provide an extraordinary opportunity to learn English. To me, it seems like a GIGANTIC writing center."

WRITING EXPERIENCE

Without a doubt, students who work in a writing center observe a transformation in their own knowledge and craft of writing. Having to explain rhetorical principles, offer a range of brainstorming and planning techniques, suggest a variety of organizational plans, and assist students in finding their pattern of error on a regular basis heightens their awareness of their own writing processes and weaknesses. As secondary education major, Nick, explained, "I've learned to take what I've helped a student with and apply that to my own writing." Brooke, an English M.A. student, noted: "I have had plenty of experience writing literature papers but not a whole lot else. Writing for The Writing Center newsletter and working with various disciplines has increased my knowledge and confidence in the field of writing." (She was the GA who landed the internship as a stringer.) Or as Jamie, a recent graduate, asserted: "If I've learned one thing I plan to carry with me into the job market, it is the importance of writing clearly and concisely."

Another English GA, Trevor, made a more sophisticated observation about the connection between consultations and writing: "[T]ime constraints leave consultants in a position where they must work to accomplish as much in the conversation as possible. While this timing seems to be [peripheral to] this work, I insist that as a consultant, you prioritize. This prioritization transcends to my writing

NEWS

NEW WRITING CENTER DIRECTORY BEING PLANNED

Dear *Writing Lab Newsletter* readers, Hello, and happy spring to you all! Along with the thrill of a milder season approaching is the excitement of an important project underway. Dr. Rebecca Day Babcock of The University of Texas of the Permian Basin, Dr. Carol Mohrbacher of St. Cloud State University, MN, and I, Emily Bouts, a graduate student at St. Cloud State, are working together to create an international writing center directory.

We need your help to make the directory as comprehensive as it can be. If you want your writing center represented in the directory, please, let us know by sending the following information: the name of your writing center, the name and title of its director, its address, telephone number, e-mail address, and fax number. This information should be sent by e-mail to St. Cloud State University's writing center, The Write Place, at writeplace@stcloudstate.edu. It's that easy. And, of course, we are open to any input or suggestions you might have to offer.

Emily Bouts
St. Cloud State University
foem0401@stcloudstate.edu

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Writing Center Manager Utah Valley State College

The posting can be read at <https://www.uvsc.jobs/applicants/jsp/shared/frameset/Frameset.jsp?time=1205423366184>. Or you can go to www.uvsc.edu and follow the links to Employment, Regular Employee—Staff, and Search Postings. In the Job Title drop-down list, select Manager Writing Center, and on the next page click the View link.

We plan to leave the job open for a month, then start screening and interviewing as quickly as possible so that the new person can be in place before the beginning of summer semester (a responsible student-tutor is acting as interim manager).

UVSC is scheduled to become Utah Valley University on July 1 (and our School of General Academics will change to something like University College). Among the changes will be that the Writing Center and its new manager will be moving to the new library and beefing up the administrative structure to better meet a university mission.

The new manager will coordinate the move to the library in time for the grand opening on July 1 (I sure hope most of the furniture will be in place). He or she will also work with the library to take part in their big open house on June 30, as well as promote the new space in Fall semester. Furthermore, our campus writing committee is developing the new position of Writing Center director, a faculty position with reassigned time, to whom the manager will report. The director will oversee strategic planning, program assessment, and other “vision” duties.

... I am better able to theoretically construct my work, often thinking of it in terms of a constant flux of information and perceptions that I must [prioritize and] arrange before me.”

Consultants may begin their tenure as a writing consultant confident of their abilities, but over time, they learn what it is they need to learn and develop into more mature writers. No matter what profession they choose, this expertise will set them apart from other job applicants.

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Participating in the daily routine of a writing center exposes writing consultants to the demands of a professional workplace. When they are on duty, they commonly work without supervision, have to put the team before themselves, and hold each other accountable for a shared level of professionalism. In the process, they learn valuable personal lessons that are better encountered in the writing center than in a career where their livelihood is at stake.

When work schedules are planned around students’ class schedules, punctuality becomes a valued commodity. Lindsay makes this clear when she writes: “Unlike other jobs, you cannot (or at least should not) simply call in sick if you are not feeling up to working that day, because the rest of the staff depends on your contribution.” What she is referring to are those days when we wake up in the morning and just don’t feel like working. As basic as it is, this is an important lesson many students have yet to learn.

While consultants can identify the qualities of a team player when they are first hired, their knowledge is based primarily on their experience in sports, school activities, or non-academic workplace settings. Working in a writing center, they come to understand another type of teamwork. Anna, a speech pathology GA, said: “This is my first job where I was able to collaborate with 15 other people. I discovered that by knowing a person’s strengths, I became a more effective collaborator.” What Anna describes is teamwork which contributes to the successful execution of the job itself, as opposed to getting along with co-workers or simply doing her share of the work.

Stephanie, a business major, described another kind of teamwork that requires balancing workplace professionalism with the desire to socialize with co-workers when she wrote: “I learned how to develop friendships with co-workers without ‘pushing’ the professional boundary.” This lesson, too, is important. One could easily imagine the quality of daily operations slipping if staff members focused on their social interactions with each other rather than the responsibilities of their job.

Consultants also have the opportunity to learn that being a professional isn’t just a matter of going through the motions of a job, but of caring about the quality with which it is done. This lesson comes home to them in our center in the form of a number of evaluations throughout the academic year: individual consultation evaluations, end-of-term class evaluations, mid-year evaluations, and the application interview. Every year, staff members who want to work another year in our writing center, must go back into the larger pool of applicants to compete for their position. The value of this process is described by Kelly, who will be a first-year law student this fall: “I learned more about how to present myself to individuals and what the real world interview process will be like. I have had to present myself for mid-year evaluations and come under the scrutiny of peer evaluations. These have shown me that someone is always watching and that just because I earned my job does not mean I’m invincible.”

Dan, a speech pathology major who was called to account by his peers for studying on the job rather than attending to his responsibilities, explained his lesson this way: “I have learned how many people notice when you go above and beyond the normal requirements of a particular job and when you fail

to meet general expectations. . . . People notice when you do your job right and when you have other priorities. It doesn't just matter that things just get done but how well they get done. . . . [T]he Writing Center has taught me that professionalism is not only a choice but a personal characteristic."

Besides professionalism, consultants develop a number of other important personal characteristics. They learn to lose their fear of not being perfect, of public speaking, working with professors who are not their teachers, and the unknown. They learn to trust themselves and to be confident in who they are and what they know. Or as Valerie said: "I have learned to be a leader rather than sitting back and doing what others tell me. I have learned to trust myself, my intelligence, and my opinions. I am confident in my skills."

JOB MARKET STRATEGY

Consultants generally aren't aware of all they have learned from their writing center experience. I know this is so from how they present it on a resume. Some simply list the writing center and dates employed in the "employment history" section of the document; others may add a brief description such as: "one-to-one tutoring" or "assisted students with drafting and proofreading." First of all, this approach assumes that everyone knows what a writing center is and what kind of work is done there. And secondly (as this article demonstrates), it undersells the range of experience and abilities the individual has acquired.

As a means of educating my consultants about how to represent their writing center work to others, I now devote two staff training sessions toward the end of the academic year to this subject. As a group, we first draw up a list of all the tasks they are responsible for as consultants. Then in the intervening week, they must do the following:

- Study the list of tasks to identify and name various categories of work; then, sort the tasks according to category
- List areas of writing expertise developed since being hired
- Based on what the lists reveal, write an explanation of how these skills/experiences contribute to your career goals
- Write an explanation of how your writing center experience has contributed to your growth as a professional.

Their responses become the subject of discussion at our next meeting. Because they come from various disciplines and have such diverse career goals, we get a variety of responses. But what quickly becomes apparent to them is the extent of their writing center experience.

Creating a focus on the professional development of one's staff not only benefits individual staff members; it can also benefit the writing center itself when administrators are making budget decisions. Writing center annual reports should highlight staff development and achievements, as well as key elements of services rendered to the university community. Administrators need to be educated about the two groups of students who benefit from a writing center: those who walk through the door for assistance and those who work on the front line providing the assistance. In tight financial times, administrators need to be aware that cutting budgets doesn't just result in reduced student service but in reduced student staff opportunities— and that's a recruitment and retention issue. Administrators need to realize that reducing the number of student workers means eliminating valuable training of professionals in the making. ♦

TAKE NOTE

NEBRASKA WRITING CENTER CONSORTIUM

1st Annual Meeting

May 2, 2008

Omaha, Nebraska

9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

"Connecting Nebraska Writing Centers"

Keynote speaker: Muriel Harris

Hosted by Metropolitan Community College

Registration fee: \$20 (before April 18, 2008); \$25 (after April 18, 2008)

See Web site for registration details and payment options: <<http://www.fwp.mccneb.edu/writingcenter/nwcc.htm>>

Contact: Katie Stahlnecker, Director, Nebraska Writing Center Consortium, (402) 738-4529, or kstahlnecker@mccneb.edu.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Director of the Academic Success Center The University of Sioux Falls

We are seeking applicants for the director of the Academic Success Center. This is a full-time, 12-month contract, exempt position with faculty status. Salary is determined by experience and education.

QUALIFICATIONS

Required

Master's degree in education or related field; experience and/or degree in special education considered; 3-5 years of experience working with students in higher education, preferably in administering a learning center and/or tutoring program. Commitment to the USF mission and values. Commitment to a Christian liberal arts education.

APPLICATION

Send applications or inquiries to:
Associate Vice President for Human Resources
University of Sioux Falls – Attn: ASC Search
1101 W. 22nd Street
Sioux Falls, SD 57105

No telephone calls. E-mail: USFhr@usioxfalls.edu; Further information is available on the Web site: <<http://www.usioxfalls.edu/hr/jobs#DirAcadSucCtr>>.

Review of applications will begin immediately and continue until the position is filled.

FROM DESIGN TO DELIVERY: THE GRADUATE WRITING CONSULTANT COURSE (PART 2)

◆ Paula Gillespie, Paul Heidebrecht, Lorelle Lamascus
Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

(This is the second article in a series on the Graduate Writing Consultant project at Marquette University. Part I, in the October WLN, covered the process that led to the current state of the project, along with guidelines for setting up such a program.)

Recent posts to WCenter make clear a new area of writing center demand: as word of the effectiveness of one-to-one work with writing spreads, graduate students seem increasingly to seek our services. Graduate schools, graduate directors, and thesis and dissertation advisors, increasingly aware of the good work of writing centers, play a role in this increasing demand. Those writing centers that lack graduate writing centers or professional tutors trained to work with graduate-level writing are asking themselves how best to meet this need. We have seen convincing proof that it's very good for undergraduates to work as peer tutors. (See the Peer Tutor Alumni Research Project at <http://www.mu.edu/writingcenter/PeerTutorAlumniPage.htm>.) We have also seen that our writing centers are enriched by undergraduate tutors from disciplines other than English, writing-intensive English, and English education. So now with the help of a grant from the Council of Graduate School's Completion Project (<http://www.phdcompletion.org/>), Marquette University has begun a program of training doctoral students from various disciplines to work in their programs as Graduate Writing Consultants (GWCs). This article will trace the steps of selecting a curriculum for the professional preparation of our graduate writing consultants and present the perspectives of the first two GWCs, Lorelle Lamascus of the Department of Philosophy, and Paul Heidebrecht, of Theology, as they took the course. It will also develop an argument for the delivery of a course-length GWC preparation program specifically for these specialist consultants that differs from a course that prepares generalist tutors.

An October article also printed here lays out the steps we took to begin this project, and invites others to begin such initiatives. We hope that this article will make it easier for others to find the right syllabus and curriculum for their programs, should they want to initiate a graduate writing consultant (GWC) program. Paula spent a semester planning and researching the course, supported by a grant of released time from the Graduate School. We then began our pilot year in the summer of 2006 with a three-credit course. Paula knew that she wanted to incorporate some of the elements from Marquette's undergraduate tutor training course, which had been offered since 1990. Paula also looked for models of courses for graduate tutors. Those she could find, though, were geared towards rhetoric and composition or English graduate students, educating and preparing consultants to be tutors and eventually perhaps to direct a writing center. The GWCs who would be trained at Marquette would not work in a writing center but would be employed within their departments. Paula found two programs that used interdisciplinary tutors within a writing center (and has since found a third), but they did not offer a course; rather, the preparation for tutoring took place on the job and through ongoing staff development. A graduate model for our course did not exist. Because Paula felt strongly that good tutoring is a process that is learned well through reflective practice, the course would last for roughly a month of meetings, reading, reflection, writing, observation of tutoring, and the preparation of materials GWCs would share with their peers and department faculty. Paul and Lorelle were paid by the Graduate School for this time, and all material was supplied for them at no cost.

Paula aimed for a course that would ground doctoral students both theoretically and practically, focusing on the needs of graduate writers, on genre, specifically the genres of their own discipline, and on genre theory. *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* 2nd edition, written primarily for undergraduate tutors helping undergraduate writers, contained chapters the GWCs needed as they learned about the writing process, the tutoring process, the observation process, and the process of doing practice tutorials. The reflective essays in the book provided them with models as they wrote their own reflective essays for the course. During their training, Paul and Lorelle reflected both in writing and in class on their own writing process as they experienced being tutored by one another.

The GWCs also needed to know about ESL writers. The video *Writing Across Borders* was a good ice breaker and excellent preparation for the chapters they read from Bruce and Rafter's *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*. They read Jeff Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work," alongside Shamoan and Burns' "A Critique of Pure Tutoring," arguments for two very complex and nuanced positions. The course did not treat these positions as examples of "good" and "bad" tutoring or

TAKE NOTE

NCLCA

The National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA)

Call for Papers

Oct. 1-4, 2008

Memphis, TN

"The Rhythm and Blues of Research and Practice"

NCLCA provides support and addresses the concerns of learning centers and learning center administrators to help practitioners develop best practices in tutoring, tutor-training, and the myriad of day-to-day needs of learning centers. This call for papers is open in scope. Quantitative, qualitative, or theoretical research on any topic related to learning centers is welcome. Please submit an abstract of the paper you wish to present. Abstracts should summarize your thesis and project. Please visit the NCLCA Conference Web site for more information: <<http://www.nclca.org/2008conference/home.htm>>. Proposal forms can be accessed on the Web site.

Submit your abstract and separate cover letter to KRanft@jointcommission.org with the e-mail subject saying "NCLCA Abstract" no later than April 30th, 2008. Conference chair: David Reedy, e-mail: reedy.d@rhodesstate.edu.

as incommensurable strategies, but as two of many positions that can be taken along a continuum of tutoring directiveness. We also read an undergraduate favorite, Ken Bruffee's "Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind" as a starting point for discussions of the value of collaborative learning and conversation with peers. (A full list of readings are listed in the margins of pp. 10-11.) Paula was pleased and a little surprised that the reaction to these readings was very positive. Neither of the GWCs had ever read any theoretical material on writing.

In the early meetings it became clear for Lorelle, the philosophy graduate student, that the method involved in peer tutoring resonated with and helped her to reflect on her own teaching practices. Being exposed to the theory of peer tutoring was also particularly meaningful for Paul, in part because he found that he was already convinced of some of its central tenets. For example, Bruffee stresses the social nature of knowledge, and while many might resonate with this starting point because of their commitment to a philosophical perspective or a social-scientific paradigm, Paul did so because of his theological commitments. From his standing place there was actually nothing very radical, or at least nothing very new about the assumption that knowledge is continually negotiated in a social context. Indeed, while most church traditions prioritize either the authority of a hierarchy or scriptural texts, some have long argued that Scripture could only be truly understood when read, interpreted, and tested within the context of a particular worshipping community. And so from an early age this Mennonite student was aware that his thoughts were never his alone—that his knowledge of the world and of God was always mediated or, even stronger, constructed by his religious community.

In any case, Bruffee stresses the social nature of knowledge in order to argue for a more collaborative social context for learning. In short: "If thought is internalized public and social talk, then writing is internalized talk made public and social again. If thought is internalized conversation, then writing is internalized conversation re-externalized" (p. 210). Thus conversation becomes the model not only for thinking, but for writing as well, and so in order to teach students how to write for graduate school, we need to be engaged in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible. Bruffee (along with many other authors) insists that tutoring is less about improving the particular writing assignments of students than improving their grasp of writing in general. The concern is with a process, not only a product. Given that conversation has become a common metaphor for doing theology, perhaps it should not come as a surprise that this too resonated with Paul. The larger point to be noted here is that providing the opportunity for a variety of disciplinary perspectives to engage writing center theory may lead to some interesting affirmations and enrichments, as well as challenges.

There is much more that could be said about how Paul and Lorelle responded to the *theory* of peer tutoring. However, another integral part of the course was providing the opportunity to observe peer tutoring sessions as well as to practice tutoring. Indeed, the course provided a concrete example of how to connect theory and practice that was quite striking to Paul, given his longstanding interest in linking theory and practice without prioritizing one over the other. Both Paul and Lorelle appreciated the way they were encouraged to dive right in and practice tutoring themselves while they continued to develop a theoretical framework for their work. There was no test to pass before they were allowed to tutor. Since it is recognized that tutoring is more akin to an art form than a laboratory procedure, more about conversation and questions than about a canonical set of steps, being able to tutor well requires plenty of practice with the subtleties of the craft, more than the ability to recall and replicate formulas. Clearly tutors are formed just as much by practice as by theory. These initial tutoring experiences also helped to make clear for Paul and Lorelle the importance of having discipline-specific writing consultants for their peers. If thought and writing really are socially constructed, and thus conversation or collaboration really is an effective way to improve both thinking and our writing, then any effort to enhance the writing of graduate students must aim to enhance the potential for genuine collaboration. And the further a student moves within a discipline or concentration within an area of study, the more difficult it becomes to find partners for conversation—Lorelle, ever the philosopher, would call them "interlocutors."

English 298 Reading List (in chronological order):

- Gillespie, Paula, and Neal Lerner. *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*, 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000. Ch. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 13.
- Bruffee, Kenneth A. "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984: 3-15.
- Brooks, Jeff. "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 15.6 (February, 1991).
- Shamoon, Linda A., and Deborah H. Burns. "A Critique of Pure Tutoring." *Writing Center Journal* 15.2 (Spring, 1995): 134-51.
- Flower, Linda. "Revising Writer-Based Prose." *Journal of Basic Writing* 3.3 (Fall/Winter, 1981): 62-74.
- Fulwiler, Toby. "Provocative Revision." *Writing Center Journal* 12.2 (Spring, 1992): 190-204.
- Elbow, Peter. "Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment." *College English* 55.2 (February, 1993): 187-206.
- Bean, John C.. "Writing Comments on Student Papers." *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996. 239-53.
- Russell, David R. "Rethinking Genre in School and Society: An Activity Theory Analysis." *Written Communication* 14.4 (October, 1997): 504-54.
- Bruce, Shanti, and Ben Rafoth. *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2004. Ch. 1, 2, 4, 5, 11.
- Sloan, Jay D. "Centering Difference: Student Agency and the Limits of 'Comfortable' Collaboration." *Dialogue: A Journal for Writing Specialists* 8.2 (Spring, 2003): 63-74.
- Melix, Barbara. "From Outside, In." *Georgia Review* 41 (Summer, 1987): 258-67.

Having a common disciplinary framework does make it possible for consultants and their peers to see themselves as part of a shared community of thinkers and writers, and this would come to have palpable effects on the culture of the departments of philosophy and theology. Paul was first struck by this realization when he contrasted his first two tutoring experiences—one with a fellow theology student and one with Lorelle. Despite his established rapport with both writers, he found it much easier to address higher-order concerns such as the strength of an argument with the theology student. And his familiarity with the usual genres of theological discourse made it possible to offer more informed comments on matters of style. In short, he was able to collaborate with his peer—to move beyond a nondirective or "minimalist" approach to tutoring in a way that better met the expressed needs of his peer. Perhaps the best sign that true collaboration had occurred was that he found himself rethinking his own approach to a related topic. This contrasted sharply with the dazed and confused state in which he found himself after listening to Lorelle's paper on Themistius and the active intellect, a subject that may cause the eyes of even the most ardent philosopher to glaze over.

On the other hand, tutoring peers from within the same graduate department can also involve some unique challenges, interesting dynamics, and choppy waters to navigate. Lorelle's first experience working with a peer in her discipline involved tutoring a friend and former officemate. More than an established rapport with the student provided the context for the session; here there was a pre-existing friendship, a shared history, and a particular way of relating to one another. Lorelle recognized in herself a tendency to have definite opinions, a frequently unbendable will, and an impulse to "fix" whatever needed fixing; these characteristics, while useful in some ways, created particular challenges for her as a teacher and tutor, especially when a friend she wanted to help was involved. This difficulty was compounded by her friend's tendency to want direction, and to rely on Lorelle to take charge in the face of uncertainty, disappointment, frustration, or failure. Such a relationship sets up a somewhat dangerous dynamic for a tutoring session which resembles in its dynamics the kind of dependence we would normally associate with naïve undergraduates.

In her efforts to steer clear of the relational dynamic that put her in the role of decision-maker and her friend in the role of decision-follower, Lorelle found the basic guidelines and rules for peer tutoring that she had been learning in the course to be very useful. Since the majority of the tutoring session focused on identifying the thesis of the 12-page seminar paper that was the occasion for their meeting, she concentrated on getting the writer to articulate what he wanted to argue. Toward the end of the session, however, the writer began asking such questions as "So how would you say that?" followed by the furious scribbling of her words. He even seemed to want the tutor to tell him what his thesis ought to be. This went on for a few minutes, and Lorelle began to feel uncomfortable—the way she felt when meeting with an undergraduate in her class who seemed only to want the "right answers." She backed off of her position a bit, trying to emphasize choices that the writer could make about the direction of his paper, and attempting to put the ball of responsibility for the paper firmly in the writer's court. Appealing once again to the peer tutoring guidelines, she concluded the session by asking the writer what he planned to do to revise his paper. The interactions from this session and the difficulties they presented formed the substance of one of Lorelle's reflection papers, and so also became the focus of class discussion.

Prior to Lorelle's session, we had discussed peer-tutoring as something done with students the tutor did not know well, if at all. Given the nature of the GWC program as discipline-specific, however, the GWCs were likely to know, to varying degrees, those who came to see them, would likely have some idea or impression of the personality of those who came to see them, and might have a pre-existing relationship that influenced the amount of direction the student sought from the tutor. This complication highlights the importance of the inclusion of basic peer tutoring guidelines in the GWC course, and the need to reflect on the different dynamic of tutoring that arises when peers who know each other enter into a tutoring session. It also draws attention to the differences among graduate students at different stages of their careers, another influential factor in the dynamic of the tutoring session. A number of graduate students experience times of struggle and doubt about their decision to pursue graduate education, and the insecurity that accompanies this can lead to the student's desire to look to the tutor as a sure guide to writing a successful graduate paper.

In working with the GWCs, Paula discovered that the basic readings in peer tutor theory and practice had greater application than she'd initially believed they would. Some of the assumptions she had made prior to the course about differences between graduate and undergraduate writers turned out to be false. She'd imagined that graduate students would show greater ownership of their writing and behave more like upper-division undergraduates than like first-year students. But she'd forgotten about the breadth of coursework required for doctoral students who are expected to specialize. And she'd forgotten about how uninterested she had been in some of the courses she had been required to take to get her own Ph.D. So the very same issues of ownership of and distance from course papers arose, the very same desire on the part of writers to ask the GWCs to supply ideas and write sentences that is seen in undergraduates, and the peer tutor training text had anticipated those issues and had given the GWCs resources for dealing with them.

Paula realized that the readings she feared would be too basic were exactly what was needed, to establish some basic assumptions. Paul and Lorelle's experiences with practice tutorials and observations were as vital for them as for undergraduates. Although there has always been plenty of discussion of genre and of disciplinary discourse in the undergraduate course, Paula has learned from working with graduate students that her undergraduates and continuing tutors can learn greatly from the intensely discipline-specific discussions she has had with the GWCs. But she would never combine the courses, as similar as they have turned out to be. Marquette undergraduates take two required semesters of rhetoric and composition, and are able to discuss discourse communities, genre differences, and code switching. The graduate students to date have had no such background and must establish this ground in the course.

Many undergraduates taking the course are surprised to find that they will not be editing papers any more, but rather that conversations with writers will lead to work on higher order concerns first. They have little or no experience with reading aloud or listening to texts. They also learn to listen differently to writers—to wait for them to finish their thoughts before jumping in with their own. While they are open to theory and will discuss it in class and in papers, their real motivation is to find “what works,” the keys to good tutoring. While they are similarly open to notions of the need for both control and flexibility, they admit in writing and in class that they yearn for a blueprint. It can take weeks, or longer, to get them over that stage. Graduate students, on the other hand, have proved ready to begin tutoring right away, but also want to study and discuss theories of one-to-one consulting, writing, and genre. They want to connect the theories we study to their own disciplines and to the teaching of their disciplines, and they subsequently find themselves very interested in writing (or communicating) across the curriculum.

In class, the GWCs spend considerable time discussing elements of graduate school life, survival in a department, teaching, the writing—and the presentation—of conference papers, issues of graduate retention, differences in genres, and more. They discuss these topics animatedly, with the involvement of developing professionals who intend to teach and publish, so they see all of our writing center work as highly relevant to them. These discussions would no doubt interest the undergraduates, but would distract them from the kinds of discussions they need to have.

While the graduates plan to look for faculty positions, for the most part, undergraduates go on to professions of all kinds, so tutoring, for many of them, is a calling they care greatly about, but they do not always see how immediately it will tie into their chosen professions. Graduate students see this right away. Paul and Lorelle went on to have very successful first years as GWCs, to work with a range of students, and to change forever the climate of and attitudes towards graduate writing in their departments. In the future articles to follow, the GWCs will provide an account of the significant changes brought about by the program in their lives and in the lives of their departments. ♦

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Welch, Nancy. “Migrant Rationalities: Graduate Students and the Idea of Authority in the Writing Center.” *Writing Center Journal* 16.1 (Fall, 1995): 5-23.

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Review of *Marginal Words, Marginal Works? Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers*. Ed. William J. Macauley Jr. and Nicholas Mauriello. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2007, 288 pp. Paperback, \$27.50; Cloth: \$65.

◆ Reviewed by Jeanne Smith (Kent State University, Kent, OH)

William J. Macauley Jr. and Nicholas Mauriello's excellent collection, *Marginal Words, Marginal Work? Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers*, serves as a road map and a how-to manual for writing center directors who are ready to shed marginalization as an identity, and is especially helpful for new directors who may rush into collaborations without considering the details of what can go wrong, or how to manage success. The issues tackled in this collection are ones that concern writing center directors everywhere—whether veterans or newcomers—as we move from the margins of our institutions toward the center. Each chapter documents a specific context in which a writing center has successfully met our common challenge of engaging the academy's assumptions about what a writing center is and does. This sort of discourse, on mentoring our colleagues, on working *with* them and not *in opposition* to them, and negotiating the pitfalls of these relationships is just the kind of coaching a new director needs as she begins to try to grow her center. My first steps as new director were to try to build cooperative relationships. However, when a writing center forms alliances with other parts of the university, when it collaborates on the projects of others, it risks a little of its identity. We may see only the potential benefits of these collaborations at first, and not be able to anticipate the pitfalls.

The closely-connected themes of communicating identity and mission, of negotiating risky collaborations, and of managing post-marginalization success stand out as most useful to me. When I came into the director's role at my institution, I had come to writing center work as a longtime adjunct instructor, and so the margins of academia were familiar territory. I wanted to build a writing center that was at the "center" of the university. As the editors of this collection note, marginality has allowed writing centers to create an identity somewhat separate from the academy. We know that our focus on collaboration, on peer mentoring, on the centrality of writing for learning, and on the situatedness of writing instruction are valuable, but we must communicate our values to administrators, students, and faculty across the disciplines, and must tell our own stories in ways that our audience(s), those who fund us and those who send their students to us—will understand.

WHAT IS A WRITING CENTER? LET THEM EXPERIENCE IT

One of the book's most useful features is that it demonstrates how a writing center can create its image and communicate about its work by exporting its methods and by attracting new populations, allowing the campus community to *experience* what a writing center does. In Chapter 5, "Writing Ourselves into Instruction: Beyond Sound Bytes, Tours, Reports, Orientations and Brochures," Muriel Harris outlines a workshop method she uses to help faculty outside of rhetoric and composition to appreciate not only the complexities of the writing process, but also the value the writing center's individualized approach. By encouraging faculty to see the similarities between their own writing processes and those of their students in her workshops on teaching writing, Harris helps them to appreciate the value of the writing center in ways no promotional campaign could accomplish. Jill Gladstein in Chapter 13, "Quietly Creating an Identity for a Writing Center," says, "a writing center educating others on its potential value must first assess its present value within the context of the college community and culture and then create opportunities to educate the community on what it learns from this assessment" (228). She presents a case study of how her center "evolved from an underutilized resource to one of the central influences on the writing culture of the college" (212) by assessing the program she had inherited, creating a rigorous tutor-training course, and using the trained tutors themselves as her "sales force" for a writing culture on campus (235). Her campus adopted writing across the curriculum, and Gladstein offered workshops to disciplinary faculty on teaching writing in the writing center, which fostered and strengthened the culture of writing on campus (237). She says, "We have quietly reestablished ourselves from a single room where students go for assistance on their papers to a program that has a symbiotic relationship with the overall writing program and the culture of the college" (242). Derek Owens shows in Chapter 9, "Two Centers, Not One," how he changed the remedial "literacy servants" (155) image of his writing center by responding to the intellectual needs of creative writers and staging a coffeehouse-like atmosphere, a "cultural center" (156). His writing center became a hub of creativity and discussion by hosting arts and cultural events to attract the wider campus community. He says, "I'm not suggesting that we simply adopt autonomous zones, heterotopias, or third spaces as comparable metaphors for our writing centers . . . But each of us can examine the architectural, geographical, social, curricular, and administrative realities of our own writing centers and expand, if possible, our mission beyond the culture of service—to be sure a tremendously important and undeniable component of who and what we are, but not the entirety of what a writing center might aspire to be" (161).

COLLABORATION WITH COLLEAGUES: RISKS AND REWARDS

Many of us have tried to build connections by allowing our tutors to become part of our colleagues' classes in various ways. What happens to our autonomy when we work in a classroom setting? What happens to our credibility when we venture outside the composition program? Have we cast ourselves even further into the "service" model? Are the risks of these collaborations worth the benefits? In Chapter 2, "Exporting Writing Center Pedagogy: Writing Fellows Programs as Ambassadors for the Writing Center," Carol Severino and Megan Knight describe how undergraduates in the Honors Program take a pedagogy course and are assigned in small teams to classes across the disciplines. They function as "ambassadors" for the writing center for both students and faculty and help to dispel myths that seeking feedback is "remedial" (27). The authors show how the Writing Fellows Program has a "ripple effect" that "helps spread the Writing Center's practices and processes across campus" (29). The visionary hope is to have a university culture that is very much like a writing center, in that faculty and students would use the sorts of writing and responding strategies a writing center would suggest (31). In Chapter 7, "Risks in Collaboration: Accountability as We Move Beyond the Centers Walls," Jane Cogie, Dawn Janke, Teresa Joy Kramer, and Chad Simpson illustrate how tricky classroom collaborations can be, how much preparation is involved, how much cooperation must be solicited prior to class visits, and how important ongoing assessment is to the effort. Linda S. Bergman and Tammy Conrad-Salvo reaffirm the value of ongoing dialogue in collaborations in Chapter 11 "Dialogue and Collaboration: Writing Lab Applied Tutoring Techniques to Relations with Other Writing Programs." The authors detail their collaborations with the First-Year Composition Program and the Professional Writing Program and conclude, "Writing centers have the potential to shape writing instruction at their respective institutions but can best realize this potential if they work in conjunction with other writing programs instead of in opposition to them" (195). In Chapter 8, "Inside Looking Out: Trading Immediate Autonomy for Long-Term Centrality," Crystal Bickford notes that it is not easy to provoke and maintain faculty interest in and support of the writing center without sacrificing some independence (136). She describes how tutors integrated themselves into classroom instruction in cooperation with faculty by visiting classes, conducting workshops and seminars based on faculty requests, and offering review and study sessions. These tutor-led activities encourage faculty-tutor contact and faculty interest in the writing center (140-42). Bickford notes that tutors and faculty even make conference presentations together in the faculty member's subject area, and the faculty members come to writing center conferences to learn about writing center methods (147). The bonds we form by allowing our tutors to work alongside faculty seem well worth risking some immediate autonomy.

POST-MARGINALIZATION: COMMUNICATING ABOUT SUCCESS

When a writing center makes itself an integral part of university life and culture, unexpected outcomes follow. Demand may exceed our ability to provide help, and our very success may be interpreted as a problem. In Chapter 14, "Encouraging or Alarming?" Jill Fey shows that even when we are able to keep up with increased demand, we may be misunderstood by those who fund us. When Fey sent her semester report to her administration, her President responded with a note labeling the increase in writing center usage "alarming," and asking her to explain it (247). The President saw the upward trend in writing center usage as alarming because he understood the writing center as a place only for underprepared first-year writers who needed "remediation." Changing her reporting style, Fey listed some of the "encouraging" reasons students would come to the writing center in greater numbers: more writers voluntarily learning more about their writing, at all levels; faculty assigning more writing, and applying more rigorous standards; students drafting and revising more (249). She says, "increasing student usage by itself may not be enough to show a writing center's contribution to academic life" (249). She demonstrates that we need to align our objectives with what our administration values, and then make sure we communicate how we meet those objectives, in formats that they will understand. "What was our writing center doing that our administration valued, that was part of the college's mission, and how could we emphasize our services in that area?" (250). She explained how participating in writing center work would allow students to answer questions on the National Survey of Student Engagement much more favorably (249), something any college administrator would be happy to see. For me, this is the most valuable lesson in the book. It is not enough to do the work; we must help people at the center of campus life and in the community outside campus to see value in what we do. Assessment will be, perhaps, the most important new conversation we will have as a field. A new director learns the lessons of post-marginalization by trial and error, trial and success. This collection is like having a strategy huddle with experienced directors. That they may be at completely different sorts of institutions with completely different cultures does not matter, because writing center goals are remarkably similar. We have a unique identity forged on the margins of the academy—rather like adjunct instructors. The chapters encourage us not only to "dream big," but also to proceed with awareness and caution, and to attend carefully to our many audiences in the academy. When you realize that you have value and you want others to recognize it too, then you must engage with the forces at the center. In an ethical collaboration, everybody "wins." This book is the hopeful story of how everyone can win. ♦

TUTOR'S COLUMN

RIFTS IN TIME AND STREET CRED VIA SKULLDUGGERY: A STUDY IN (NON)TRADITIONAL PEER TUTORING

◆ J. Tremblay (Penn State University-Berks, Reading, PA)

When we talk about peer tutoring, the question of what constitutes a “peer” is a difficult one to answer, but one that continues to be the subject of debate. As an adult returning student in my early thirties, this was a question that weighed heavily on my mind as I entered the first tutoring session with my group of traditional (ages 18 to 22) students. Would they actually view me, a thirty-two year old man enjoying his mild case of Peter Pan syndrome, as a peer, or would they align me with their instructor and treat me with the deference and distance that instructors traditionally receive? The answer, I would find, was somewhere in the middle.

Studies have shown that “cross-age tutoring, or unmatched age pairs may be more effective than peer tutoring or matched age pairs” (qtd. in Fresko and Chen 125). More specifically, “significant academic gains . . . were observed in tutees who were taught by older tutors” (qtd. in Fogarty and Wang 452). Author Deborah Sheldon theorizes that the reason for this improved chance for success is because “older, more experienced students are more apt to have mastered targeted skills” (35). It is reasonable to assume that an extra decade or so of practical application and life experience will better qualify anyone wishing to model and foster any given behavior or skill, and writing proved to be no exception as I began working with my tutees.

As a student in my university's peer tutoring course, I began working with a fixed group of three traditional students in a separate basic composition course. Our peer tutoring class met every Monday and Friday to discuss our progress and review materials and strategies related to tutoring, while every Wednesday was dedicated to visiting the basic composition class in order to help our assigned groups with their current writing assignments. To help our writers become more comfortable with the collaborative aspects of writing, each tutor worked with his or her small group members simultaneously, forgoing the more traditional one-to-one practices often espoused by writing centers. For all practical purposes, tutors and tutees were on equal footing, save perhaps for the unfortunate (and incorrect) perception that the tutors had more academic power than tutees.

In order to begin building a relaxed, peer-oriented rapport, I made a point to spend over half of our first session getting to know my group members and allowing them to learn about me, taking care to be genuine and truthful, before we began any actual writing work. We talked about sports, videogames, music, the way school can sometimes be overwhelming, the quality of the cafeteria food, etc. Despite our age differences, we found that we had plenty of things in common to discuss, and the group quickly achieved a functional level of comfort. Once the work began during that first session, the tutees seemed to embrace the group process, looking to me for guidance, but attempting to make helpful suggestions on the other members' work.

The following session, however, began with a more stilted tone. Once we had settled into our group, the tutees began to treat me more like an instructor than a peer. Though they were initially eager to begin working on their papers, their enthusiasm quickly waned. They became passive and stiff, forcing me to draw participation out of them. I had attempted to make it clear that we were all equals, but it was as if they had laid their portions of power on the table and expected me to pick them up and claim them as my own. Essentially, the situation was far removed from the idea that “more often than not tutors are valued first for their friendship and concern and then for their teacher-like esteem” (Fogarty and Wang 453). Were these the same writers with whom I had shared videogame tips and popular music trash-talk the week before? I started to get the feeling that my group had reconsidered the notion that they could speak to me as an equal, perhaps unconsciously engaging the mental filter through which many students speak to instructors.

Since we had gotten right to work at the beginning of the session, we finished our writing discussion with class time to spare. Faced with twenty minutes of potentially awkward silence, I scrambled for a way to use our time constructively. It occurred to me that students frequently feel that their writing skills are inadequate, which leads to a reluctance to discuss the writing skills that they do possess, particularly if they are pursu-

ing a course of study which does not traditionally focus on written communication. How, then, might a writing tutor, especially one noticeably older, convince such a student, for whom writing skills hold little perceived importance, that becoming a better writer will have far-reaching benefits?

As we sat in our circle waiting for the clock to run out, I decided to tell personal anecdotes in which my writing skill has compensated for other academic deficiencies-- in short, stories where being a good writer "pulled my feet from the academic fire." For instance, there was the time I had read only the back cover of a novel that was required reading for an English literature class and still managed a 95% on an essay test about the novel. Or how about the time I wrote an extra credit essay in a math class and boosted my final semester grade by an entire category? Or maybe the year of high school during which I exchanged English paper assistance for help with physics assignments from a more scientific classmate?

Certainly, some of these examples are frowned upon in traditional academia, but the key to producing a positive outcome when using somewhat unscrupulous examples is to appeal to a tutee's sense of utility, and to a lesser degree, sense of impish conspiracy, while taking care not to cross the line into advocating academic dishonesty. Choosing one's practical examples prudently is essential, as "modeling is considered of paramount importance among the factors responsible for behavior-change in tutees in the course of tutor-tutee interaction," (Bar-Eli et al. 285), and the tutor's function is to help foster better writing by better writers, not to encourage delinquency.

My purpose in telling these tales was not to suggest to freshmen composition students that writing is a tool to facilitate academic laziness or dishonesty, but rather that advanced writing skills can have practical uses outside of their writing classrooms. My fairly specific orientation as a student old enough to be my group members' older brother, but not old enough to be their father, afforded me a good balance of accessibility and credibility; I could be viewed as a peer, but one with more experience than the traditional students, and I was there to offer the type of viewpoint and shared motivations that their instructor would not. As the group listened to my stories, our dynamic reverted to the easy back-and-forth of the previous week. I realized that my tutees, for better or worse, seemed to view and treat me as a teacher when there was writing work to be done, but were happy to treat me like a peer once our writing tasks had been seen to.

In subsequent sessions, I achieved greater success by bracketing the actual writing development with casual, unrelated conversation at the beginning and end of each class. Regardless of age, there are scholastic and cultural experiences which all students share, and discussing them helps to put everyone at ease and enhance group cohesion. The non-traditional peer tutor, however, may need to make an extra effort to find common ground with traditional students who may be several years or even decades younger. Looking back, my initial trepidation proved to have some merit, but the challenges created by our age differences were not insurmountable. It is important to note, but easy to forget, that everyone in a peer tutoring group carries the same practical authority, regardless of age. It is the shared desire to improve our skills that truly makes us peers, a kinship that transcends arbitrary generational boundaries.

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CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

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

Contact: Doug Dangler: dangler.6@osu.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://www.ec-wca.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/>>.

April 25-26, 2008: Pacific Northwest Writing Centers Association, in Everett, WA

Contact: Ann Harrington: e-mail: aharrington@everettcc.edu; phone: 425-388-9309. Conference Web site: <<http://www.pnwca.org/?q=node/86>>.

May 2, 2008: Nebraska Writing Center Consortium, in Omaha, NE

Contact: Katie Stahlnecker: e-mail: kstahlnecker@mccneb.edu, (402) 738-4529. Conference Web site: <<http://www.fwp.mccneb.edu/writing-center/nwcc.htm>>.

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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