

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

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

May, 2008

— FROM THE EDITOR —

As you collect data for that yearly report and interview prospective tutors for next year, this issue of *WLN* offers some suggestions to contemplate over the summer. LeAnn Nash introduces us to a group of students not often categorized, as she does, as ESL writers. In her essay, she provides valuable insights when working with Deaf students. Then Ann Litman also delves into a new area not adequately reflected on—the benefits to tutors when they attend conferences where they connect theory with practice and participate in the scholarship of the field. We welcome more reflections on these conference spaces as well as on the spaces our tutorial centers inhabit.

For those of us who are curious about the software program *Late Night Writer*, Doug Dangler, Seth Reno, and Shawn Casey discuss the merits of this program. Returning to the importance of practice, Jesse Kavadlo draws on a Zen proverb to draw out implications of how tutors work. Finally, Terry Collins draws us back to another less discussed population of writers who enter the writing center doors: students with Asperger's Syndrome, and she helps us understand their needs and also offers valuable suggestions for how to assist them in tutorials.

And please note the list of winners of IWCA scholarship awards (see page 5), and among that distinguished group, we proudly congratulate Mike Mattison, one of our associate editors for *WLN*, whose article is one of the two Outstanding Scholarship Awards for Articles in 2007.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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ESL IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT: CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

◆ LeAnn Nash
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We understand that the language needs of students who speak English as a Second Language complicate writing center work. Much has been written about these complications and how tutors might appropriately address them. But what if the student's first language is not an oral language, but a signed one? How does this affect our understanding of the complications we associate with ESL students in the writing center? How can we address the specific needs of Deaf students in writing center work?

With more than twenty years' experience as a certified interpreter, four years' experience as an instructor of American Sign Language, and twenty-nine years as the wife of a Deaf husband, I have gained practical knowledge about language acquisition and obstacles to writing skills for Deaf students. Based on my experiences, we should not assume that the language functions of a Deaf student are the same as those for a hearing ESL student because there are significant differences in language acquisition and use. These differences shed light on the peculiar challenges for tutors working with Deaf students in the writing center. When working with Deaf students, we should consider language barriers and other factors that may complicate matters in engaging these students.

While we can accept and agree that Deaf people have a distinct subculture (hence the use of "Deaf" hereafter), we may not realize the great deal of di-

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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.

iversity found within Deaf culture, which is perhaps not as widely recognized and understood as the diversity we recognize in other ESL students. For example, within Deaf culture there are divisions, or subcultures, which are determined by a variety of factors. All Deaf do not use the same standard form of signed language. Some do not sign at all. Some Deaf students have been through oral-centered education systems where using sign language was forbidden. Others have been in a mainstream school environment with interpreters or other aids to communication in their classrooms. And still others have been through state-supported schools for the Deaf where their instruction was delivered in signed language. Some of these students may use American Sign Language as their native form of language, and still others will use Signed English, by which I mean any one of several systems of hand signs or shapes used in a way that approximates exact English grammar and structure. There are regional, dialectical differences to take into consideration as there are within any culture of people who use English either as their native or second language. Signed language also varies from country to country. With all this language background variety, imagine the differences in writing skills of each of these students!

While many ESL students face educational obstacles, for Deaf students there are subtle differences. Writing in the book *Journey into Deaf World*, Ben Bahan states, "like other language minorities, most people in the Deaf-World were born into it. However, unlike other minorities, children born into this one gain access to the language and culture at various ages" (Lane 6). Bahan and his co-authors go on to explain that many of these Deaf children cannot communicate with their parents, so their language acquisition is delayed (161). For these students, education is an exercise in frustration, not because the student is incapable of learning, but because there is such a huge language barrier in place by the time they start school. Deaf students may find themselves in classrooms where learning disconnects for them because of the lack of adequate communication in a language that is clear to both student and teacher. Bahan and his co-authors give examples of a child not able to understand written print well until age thirteen and a student reading at a third-grade level in junior high school, which is typical for many Deaf (228).

Hearing parents make up 90 – 95% of parents of Deaf children, setting up an automatic communication barrier from birth. While Deaf children develop normally in all other ways, language development frequently comes last because these children often do not have the same opportunities to develop language fully at early ages. With hearing loss treated as impairment rather than as a disability, these children grow up struggling to master the commonly used language at home with only what they can see in front of them. Parents may struggle to make choices that affect language development with inadequate information about what services and educational choices are available for the child. What sign system should they use? Should they use a signed language at all? Should they have a cochlear implant done in an effort to create hearing in the child? Are these ethical choices?

Many choices are available, but little in practical education about Deaf culture and language forms exists today, and Deaf students may go through their early life and first years in education surrounded by confusion with endless obstacles to overcome. Somehow many complete high school and now, with open enrollment in our colleges and universities, we find more of these Deaf students attempting college work than ever before and coming into writing centers for help with assignments and papers. We often assume that because these students have completed high school and enrolled in college they are able to function in much the same way as any other beginning ESL student, with the same level of English proficiency, only to find that it is just not the case.

The language barriers I mentioned earlier, particularly the different sign systems in use today, affect this proficiency much more than we might readily believe possible. Even a Deaf student using a form of Signed English is not going to have the same English language competency as his hearing counterpart because so much of the meaning of language is associated with the nuances of verbal usage. When hearing sign-

ers attempt communication, other problems arise. A skilled user of Signed English can only present about 50 – 80% of what they say in sign, and skilled lip-readers will net a similar percentage of the spoken communication. A communication breakdown often results in misunderstandings between students and instructors, leading to misconceptions about students' abilities to handle the reading and writing requirements of the academy. This affects us directly in the writing center when we have students come in for help with misconceptions and confusion about assignments and their instructor's expectations. Certainly, there are several ways we can help this group of ESL learners.

How *do* we handle those tutoring sessions? When a hearing student comes in to the writing center for tutoring, we usually use what Kenneth Bruffee would call the “conversation of mankind” (Weaver 222)—we sit and talk with the students, ask about the assignment, ask questions to determine what kinds of help they need most, and as we talk through the process with them, they often arrive at some kind of solution that helps them learn one more step of the academic writing process. This conversational form works with most hearing students quite well and will also work with some Deaf students. A study done with high-achieving Deaf students at Rochester Institute of Technology reveals that Deaf students whose families made conscious efforts to offer a “normal” exposure to language and conversation can also do quite well with academic writing requirements (Toscano et al.).

But with many Deaf students, the writing center conversational style of tutoring is simply not effective. We must seek to understand Deaf students in a slightly different way, to “hear” their conversation in a different light. In order to achieve a greater level of success when we start to work with a Deaf student, there are several things we should know. We will use many of the strategies we use with other ESL students. But there are a few key differences. We must also know how to appropriately use interpreter services, as most college and university students will have those services available as a result of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Using an interpreter's services requires understanding the role of the interpreter, because that affects how we interact with the student. Professional interpreters receive training, pass regular skills evaluations to maintain certification, and hold to a strict code of ethics and confidentiality much like legal and medical professionals. They have specific roles to fulfill, which should be made clear to both the student and the tutor. A skilled interpreter functions to facilitate communication between the hearing and Deaf, not only with regard to language but culture as well. This is an important key in reaching these students. In an effort to articulate the interpreter's role, a team of scholars have identified several conceptualizations of interpreter perspective, noting how each perspective may influence the interpreter's effectiveness in an educational setting. These perspectives are important for us in writing center work because they directly affect how well we are able to communicate with the students we serve. According to Hwa-Froelich and Westby, an interpreter may function as “listener, speaker, gatekeeper, interviewer, social agent, and conversationalist” (79). Knowing how the interpreter functions with the student is crucial in establishing a successful tutoring session. The student is the focus of our time, face to face, not the interpreter, and understanding the interpreter's role makes this easier to accomplish. American Sign Language, as well as other forms of signed language, often depend a great deal on facial expression, so more direct eye contact will be needed to gauge how well we are communicating with Deaf students as we work with them.

“ [W]ith many Deaf students, the writing center conversational style of tutoring is simply not effective. We must seek to understand Deaf students in a slightly different way, to ‘hear’ their conversation in a different light. ”

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If one or two tutors can work well with a Deaf student, we should set regular sessions up by appointment so that the student consistently works with the same people on their writing. This consistency can make a big difference simply because it avoids the problem of having to start the communication process over with a new tutor each time the student comes into the writing center for help. Multiple appointments to work on the same assignment may be necessary. What takes thirty minutes with a hearing student will usually take more time with a Deaf student because of the increased time it takes to work through the communication barriers. We may have additional complications to consider. Working with an interpreter can be further complicated if the student and interpreter are not using the same signed language, for example, an interpreter skilled in Signed English with a student whose native form is American Sign Language, or vice versa. Sometimes we may have a student whose language skills are so limited that, even with an interpreter, we have to find other, creative ways to make sure we understand one another.

Even if regular appointments are not possible, tutors should contact instructors and find out about class assignments and expectations. Sometimes we do not get the whole picture from students, and this is critical in tracing what creates confusion in the communication process. Ask what roles the interpreter serves in class and out of class, ask about the student's literacy history and practices. Be aware that we may have to define or explain literacy to these students, so that they can in turn tell us what we need to know to work with them best. We may need to help Deaf students develop critical thinking skills, and I find that using practical, everyday examples of things to illustrate meaning are often most effective. Using spatial and visual images are sometimes more effective examples with American Sign Language users as well. Don't assume if the student smiles and nods that (s)he has understood you, for that may indicate a desire to not offend you, even though confusion reigns, rather than a degree of understanding. Ask specific questions about the assignment. Are there terms that need to be defined? Does the student understand the goal or purpose of the task? Look for the same body language cues that you get from other students when you can tell they have connected with what you are saying. Is the student engaged in the conversation—leaning in to ask questions or follow your examples? Or is (s)he sitting back with arms crossed?

Margaret Weaver chronicled her writing center work with a Deaf student, and hers is a valuable example for us to know what Deaf students may need most in the writing center. The Deaf student Weaver worked with was able to communicate in American Sign Language, and to some extent in Signed English. Although a bright student, she and her instructor had misunderstood one another's communication about what the instructor expected on specific assignments, resulting in the instructor's recommendation that she go to the writing center for help. When that occurred, Weaver began to try to find ways to better communicate the instructor's assignments and expectations, as well as to help the student express what she had understood back to the instructor in the required writing. Interestingly, Weaver found that the student *had* understood the assignment and expectations, but had tried to provide appropriate information to the instructor using her native signed language as the natural center of reference for how to write what she wanted to say. The connections to the assignment were there, just communicated in a language form unfamiliar to the instructor. Once Weaver realized this, she and the student were able to work through the assignment in a way that allowed the student to see what needed to change in her writing and why, at least to some extent, while still allowing the student to make language choices in her writing that kept her Deaf cultural center of reference in view. They worked together to avoid terms that implied hearing references in favor of terms that favored the student's cultural understanding; then connections were more easily made for the student.

Several sessions followed over the semester with the student gaining a better understanding of how to write her thoughts into an appropriate language form that met the instructor's requirements. Weaver offers a key explanation on the differences in Deaf and hearing centers of reference with this simple example: to a Deaf person, the phrase "a little hard of hearing" means having slight hearing, while to hearing people it means having slight deafness. That small change in meaning from one language form to another is a key component of what we must recognize and be able to teach or tutor in writing center work with Deaf students, just as it is for other ESL learners.

Asking the student if (s)he understands the assignments and expectations of the instructor or professor, then using that information to build the bridges that help close the gaps in the writing process for that individual student is another task we should consider. Often I find that the student may have a good general idea of the kind of assignment but may have no idea about some of the components that can make a completed assignment successful in meeting instructors' requirements. Deaf students may not have developed anything they can identify or articulate to us as their writing "process"—they may not know how to freewrite, brainstorm, organize ideas, craft or support an argument, or know what those terms mean in a writing context. We may need to teach the "parts" of a successful paper. We may need to demonstrate how to develop a thesis and supporting argument as an example for the student. As tutors, we are most effective when we can communicate in specific ways that connect directly with what the students need to work on in their writing. This may involve enhancing vocabulary, demonstrating how to do specific types of research, or formatting a paper by MLA or APA standards, or it may involve just talking through what they *think* the assignment is asking for them to do.

Deaf students, like all other students, seek a way to master the requirements of the academy. The first step for them and us, as tutors, is to establish solid communication about what the academy expects. Sensitivity to the language barrier and an effort to "hear" these Deaf students' needs is a critical component in that mastery. Most importantly, we must remember that each of these Deaf students comes to us with potential for amazing writing improvement, the same as their hearing ESL counterparts, and that what may seem a little scary or uncomfortable for us may be worse for them. ♦

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NEWS

INTERNATIONAL WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION AWARDS

At the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Michele Eodice, IWCA President, announced the IWCA's awards for scholarship in 2007 as follows:

Outstanding Scholarship in a Book Award for 2007:

Macauley, William, Jr., and Nicholas Mauriello, Eds. *Marginal Words, Marginal Work? Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2007.

Outstanding Scholarship in an Article Award for 2007:

Brown, Renee, Brian Fallon, Jessica Lott, Elizabeth Matthews, and Elizabeth Mintie. "Taking On Turnitin: Tutors Advocating Change." *Writing Center Journal* 27.1 (2007): 7-28.

Mattison, Michael. "Someone to Watch Over Me: Reflection and Authority in the Writing Center." *Writing Center Journal*. 27.1 (2007): 29-51.

A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION: REFLECTIONS ON CONFERENCES AND TUTOR TRAINING

◆ Ann Litman

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I arrived at the 30th East Central Writing Centers Association (ECWCA) conference (April 11-12, 2008) thinking about tutor training—my presentation topic—and about the ways we introduce tutors to writing center scholarship. While Andrea Lunsford called for conference participants to foster “a culture of writing” on our college campuses, those of us present, by discussing cultures of writing with each other, fostered a culture of collaboration as well. At conferences, the theory that our tutors talk about all year finally becomes visible, and tutors become part of the professional conversation.

In sharing best practices for tutor training at the conference, I stressed theory’s importance but also shared writing center literature’s occasional cautions about when and how to introduce tutors to theory. In particular, Peter Vandenberg suggests in “Lessons of Inscription: Tutor Training and the ‘Professional Conversation’” that “[w]ithout a pedagogy that actively encourages the roles of literate activity in the social construction of knowledge,” administrators who ask tutors to study theory can entrench them in a theory/practice divide, because these tutors aren’t contributing to the theory and, therefore, don’t see its connections to their work (70). Vandenberg presents this point as a suggestion for effective tutor study of scholarship, but it also presents a challenge: to introduce tutors to the professional conversation without excluding them from it.

Conference attendance is the antidote to this theory/practice divide, and conference participation is a stronger formula yet. The presence of tutors at conferences allows these tutors to go beyond being exposed to scholarship to acquiring ownership of the professional conversation by adding their voices to the discussion. This participation shows tutors what it means to be a part of a culture of collaboration. Tutors who participate in conferences enact the very collaborative thinking and writing practices we espouse in writing center sessions every day.

Engaging tutors in this culture of collaboration has been a particular challenge at Duquesne University, where graduate TAs in the English Department are required to work in the writing center as part of their teaching assistantships. The general sentiment at the beginning of the year is often, “I *get* to teach, and I *have* to work in the writing center.” In my time at Duquesne, I’ve found that it doesn’t take long for this attitude to change. These graduate tutors quickly realize how rewarding center work is and how many opportunities it offers for learning and implementing new teaching strategies. They also come to appreciate the value of collaboration by working alongside other tutors, sharing experiences, and learning from each other’s expertise. Each year, new graduate tutors discover that the writing center field has its own body of scholarship, and that conversations about writing center theory are ongoing. Certainly, part of this realization is the theoretical material these tutors are exposed to in their training—learning a bit about writing center history, reading and discussing landmark articles—but I’ve found that the largest component of introducing tutors to the professional conversation is conference attendance and participation.

At ECWCA, I attended a series of two consecutive panels that demonstrated the value of tutors joining the writing center conversation. These panels’ conversation connected to the conference theme of “Looking Back, Looking Forward” by discussing, from different starting points, the intersections between tutoring and teaching. First, Jill Pennington, Leslie Farris, and Thomas Nicholas, and then Carrie Rodesiler spoke about the ways their previous tutoring experiences inform their current practice as teachers. Next, Marianne Holohan, Erin O’Driscoll, and Melissa Wehler, graduate tutors from the Duquesne center, explored how their roles as teachers contribute to and complicate their simultaneous roles as tutors. While

Pennington's group considered notions of conversation and its differences between the classroom space and the writing center space, Holohan's group reflected on individual experiences within each space and the roles a tutor/teacher fills in each venue. This was not idle talk: panelists also addressed the tasks of teaching grammar and mechanics, the challenges of promoting critical thinking, and the ethics of sharing knowledge within tutoring and teaching roles. More important, the speakers reflected critically on their experiences and used past and current scholarship to negotiate and inform their own practice. For the tutors in particular, I can think of no better way to see oneself as an integral part of and contributor to the professional conversation.

Perhaps the most prominent value in tutors' conference attendance is the ongoing conversation it promotes. Shortly after ECWCA, Kim Ballard posted on WCenter that "'Community' and 'professionalism' and 'if only our institution understood us like this' all cropped up in the various car talk and cell phone conversations we shared during our five hour drive . . . back to Kalamazoo." Conferences leave tutors energized and eager to continue talking about center work, and these conversations resonate within our centers when consultants return. For example, on the Monday following the conference, a consultant rounded the corner of my cubicle to say, "I just used my conference experience to work through a session!" Tutors can gain experience outside of conferences, but their experience, and the discussions we have about theory and practice in our individual centers, is closed. The experience gained at a conference is infinitely more valuable, because it shows tutors that their own worries are shared across states, across nations, and even, in keeping with the ECWCA theme, across time. Conferences give tutors the chance to make themselves heard and the awareness that someone is listening.

The ECWCA conference was one of many regional writing center conferences being held on the same weekend. As tutors and administrators gathered in Columbus to dissect old narratives and create new lore, our counterparts were doing the same at the Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference at Boise State University, the Mid-Atlantic WCA at Temple University, and the Northeast WCA at the University of Vermont. Thus the culture of collaboration continues, and ECWCA is one of many microcosms of writing center work that are collectively represented in the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA). How lucky we are to be thinking and working in a field in which each member's voice is heard, and each individual's ideas are considered. ♦

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WRITING CENTERS AND HEURISTIC SOFTWARE: THE CASE OF THE LATE NIGHT WRITER

◆ *Seth Reno, Shawn Casey, and Doug Dangler*
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If you are a writing center administrator, you probably have received an e-mail advertising “The Late Night Writer” (LNW), a humanities-focused educational software writing program. This Web-based application represents an attempt to automate a heuristic process for the production of reports and reviews. Although the application could be successful in helping students create text, it carries the liability of not necessarily aiding writers to better understand the writing or drafting processes. As a result, it is tempting to ignore or rail against software like LNW. However, with participation in online education steadily building across disciplines and colleges, writing center administrators cannot afford to ignore the implications of such software. Administrators must be able to carefully consider the constraints and affordances of software like LNW before arguing to adopt or reject such automated or semi-automated tutorial options. This essay argues for ways to adopt and implement software so that it is complementary to the aims of writing centers.

LNW focuses on helping students generate a rough draft at the expense of explaining the writing process. The Web site acknowledges its incongruity with the aims of writing instruction by warning students that the application is not designed to be used with English courses. LNW states that it “is not intended for completing assignments in writing courses. Why not? Courses such as Freshman Writing require students to learn and practice differing approaches to writing, the choice of which depends on the instructor.” Clearly, the pedagogical aims of writing centers and the LNW creators differ. Yet, as with many technologies, LNW offers affordances and constraints that are better understood in their implications for writing centers rather than dismissed outright for their failure to meet our immediate or ingrained expectations.

Latenightwriter.com, currently in its beta phase, is free. It should load easily into most browsers and function well. It claims to be best used on Internet Explorer 5.5 and Mozilla 1.0 and higher, and compatibility with Safari and Netscape is underway. The Web site, however, mentions plans to charge for sessions when the system “goes live.” Pricing and packages have not yet been established but would likely follow a model of offering a set number of sessions for a flat fee. If writing centers choose to adopt LNW as a component of their service mission, both the pricing and the choice to pay for these services will need to be integrated into centers’ overall budget. Will the cost of LNW or services like it require administrators to reduce tutoring staff? Once the costs of LNW are calculated, administrators who choose to purchase LNW will need to integrate the service effectively in order to compensate for the potential loss of other, more traditional writing center services.

At the time of writing, LNW offers the user help in creating only two types of writing assignments: reports and reviews. LNW uses these genres to encompass nearly every type of academic paper. For example, the user is prompted to select “report” if the assignment “contains words like report, discussion, information, data, history, condition, progress, development, present status, issues, problem, or facts.” In the more than ten pages of questions associated with the report module, users are led to identify a basic collection of facts, characters, and characteristics about the subject of their report. The report can be made more specific by selecting to answer optional questions like “What information about the subject’s beginnings should be added?” and “What numerical information—that is, what statistics—might bring the subject into sharper focus?” These questions allow the user to adapt the genre for specific purposes or specific audiences.

After selecting a genre and beginning a session, users are prompted to answer a series of questions with complete sentences. The answers are then used to create and organize the paper. In the report module, the answers to the first group of questions serve as the topic sentences for each of the eight successive paragraphs. Body paragraphs are sequentially fleshed out by the user’s answers to further questions.

Writing center administrators and tutors may find the lack of human interactivity in LNW worrying. Instead of a tutor asking a client a variety of questions in order to generate ideas and reflection on the writing process, LNW users are led through a series of forms that ask them to respond to general questions about the subject. By setting aside reflection and arrangement concerns, the program obscures the writing process and focuses the student on answering isolated questions. Only upon completion of the program is the student able to see these answers pieced together into a completed paper. Lacking reflective prompts, there is no guarantee that the student will recognize the strung-together sentences that construct the paragraphs in the final product. Besides the stylistic problems that this approach raises—our draft was notably lacking in transitions and the relationships between the facts given remained unclear—the application also presents some pedagogical problems. Students miss the opportunity to explore the connections between the ideas in their writing and they miss the opportunity to learn how writing works as a process. The program does, however, allow the user to view his or her paper at any point during the session, and there is a mandatory “break” halfway through the session designed so that users will in fact check their progress. It is uncertain, however, that undergraduates using the program would willfully stop to productively think about organization, structure, and revision if the paper is due in only a few hours. The program runs the risk of creating writers who mindlessly and mechanically answer the questions in hopes of beating their looming deadlines. It is easy to feel disengaged from the process of writing in answering question after question without knowing why or how the answers will be used and organized.

As an invention tool, LNW has strengths. The program’s greatest strength lies in getting a writer writing. It offers a heuristic that some writers may find valuable because they are more comfortable answering questions. The first thing that the writer notices about this site (presumably after reading the FAQs and paying for access) is the questions. These are the face of the program to the writer, the aspect that they will have to interact with the most. The questions are generally useful and aimed at forcing writers to think about what they want to do in small chunks. That is, the value of the questions is that they reduce the totality of an article down to a few small blocks of text that writers can handle one at a time without thinking about overall structure or an argument. The value is in having a structure for writers to follow, or at least having a form for them to follow (if not a structure in the traditional sense).

LNW helps the user produce a rough draft, but only as a prewriting or exploration tool, not a software program aimed at a final paper. This recommendation is in fact asserted in the rhetoric of the Web site in its resistance to offer help to students in writing courses. This would seem problematic as writing centers generally have a large clientele of students in writing courses, but this may be the best way to integrate LNW with writing center work. For students in courses that do not include writing instruction, this could be an advantage, especially for writing centers where students in other fields such as engineering, technology, and business are regular clients. Writers should consider using LNW, and writing centers might find it useful if they have tech-savvy clients who are looking to start writing. It may be helpful to have clients who request help with brainstorming and prewriting to use LNW before their session at the writing center (the length of the sessions—two hours—might make it less useful in the hourly world of writing centers). This way, the client already has a rough draft to work with and is already thinking to an extent about the process of writing.

More generally, LNW represents the possible future of online education and automated writing instruction. In the increasingly digital world of academia, writing center administrators must begin to consider how they will effectively incorporate these new technologies into writing centers without compromising the core goals of writing instruction. A goal of many writing centers is to produce better writers by helping clients reflect on their own writing practices and processes. Although lacking this, LNW may potentially work better in conjunction with a writing center tutorial during which the LNW user

(continued on page 13)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

DIRECTOR, WRITING CENTER FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Florida International University (FIU) invites applications for the position of Writing Center Director at the associate or full-professor level to lead the redesign of FIU’s Writing Center after its move to a new campus space. The director will hold faculty status in the English Department and must possess the credentials to be tenured in the Department. The successful candidate will possess the leadership skills and administrative experience necessary to develop a writing center as well as a record and research agenda commensurate with a tenured position at FIU. Ph.D. in rhetoric/composition or related field is required.

A public, urban research-intensive university, FIU serves over 38,000 students and is one of the nation’s largest Hispanic-serving universities. The Director will have the opportunity develop a center that will serve both graduate and undergraduate students, within a diverse and international environment.

To apply, candidates should send a letter of application that details administrative experience and research interests, a CV, the names and contact information for three to five references, and a sample of scholarly research to

Writing Center Director Search
Committee
Florida International University
Department of English
University Park Campus
11200 S.W. 8th Street
Miami, Florida 33199.

Application review began March 31, 2008, and continues until the position is filled.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

INSTRUCTIONAL FACULTY- ENGLISH/WRITING CENTER SAN ANTONIO COLLEGE

Job Description: Teach at least one three-hour English course per semester; oversee and assess writing center's instructional programs; hire, teach, and evaluate faculty and graduate student tutors as facilitators of small-group and one-to-one writing instruction; offer writing across the curriculum consultation and workshop instruction; teach writing instruction workshops in the classroom and the writing center; coordinate with faculty to serve all instructional programs that require writing; design and implement online tutoring programs; develop instructional handouts and other curricular materials.

Minimum Education: Master's degree in English or a Master's degree with at least 18 graduate hours in English. Preferred Education; earned doctorate in English, Rhetoric and Composition, or Writing Center Studies.

Minimum Experience: One year experience working in a writing center (tutorial and administrative); two years experience teaching developmental and transfer-level composition courses experience; ability to interact effectively with faculty and students from developmental, academic, and professional/technical areas. Preferred Experience: Five years experience working in a writing center (tutorial and administrative); three years experience teaching developmental and transfer-level composition courses; experience working with community college students or other diverse populations; knowledge of writing across the curriculum; experience working in an online environment with teaching and/or tutoring.

To apply for this position, visit the ACCD People Link site: <<https://accdpeoplelink.accd.edu/>>. Search for Requisition Number: 081391. Feel free to contact Lennie Irvin (llirvin@gmail.com) with queries.

PREACH WHAT YOU PRACTICE: ZEN, PARADOX, AND A FEW KIND WORDS FOR WRITING CENTER TUTORS

◆ Jesse Kavadlo

Maryville University, St. Louis, MO

The obstacle is the path.

--Zen proverb

The most able tutors are often the most reluctant. Each year, as writing center director, I find myself in the tricky position of convincing prospective tutors of their own great potential. Rather than persuade them of their present skills, which are always remarkable, instead I have chosen to emphasize their upcoming preparation and work. I assure new tutors that we will work together—reading, meeting, and writing—but in the end, only practice will allay their doubts. And sometimes, they believe me. Yes, practice makes perfect. But what makes practice?

In “Zen and the Art of the Writing Tutorial,” Paul Gamache asks tutors to engage in “critical self-examination” and suggests that “it is important that you critically examine your own motives, assumptions, purposes, and actions, for with understanding comes the possibility of self direction (literally, ‘self-control’)” (2). Yet self-examination frequently leads to self-consciousness, not in the sense of awareness and reflexivity as much as reticence and embarrassment. Gamache’s term, “critical-self examination,” out of pedagogical context, could easily sound more like self-doubt, which these students are already experiencing, than self-direction. And doubt, as Zen-influenced writer Natalie Goldberg memorably puts it in *Writing Down the Bones*, “is torture” (108).

The potential tutor’s initial doubt sometimes stems from the contradictory nature of the tutoring enterprise. Obviously, writing tutors themselves are nearly always good writers, or they would not be tapped to tutor. But what do we mean by “good writers”? Often, their recommenders—usually, instructors—mean that these students seldom make, or never made, the kinds of grammatical mistakes that concern many of their students: tutors express themselves well and clearly, and they have ideas worth expressing in the first place. In other words, tutors must learn to help their students avoid grammatical, rhetorical, logical, and perceptual pitfalls that they themselves have seldom fallen into, indeed perhaps never acknowledged were there to be avoided at all.

This is not to say that tutors do not work enormously hard on their writing. Just the opposite—they frequently spend more time on their own writing than do less adept writers, never succumbing to the temptation of shortcuts and certainly disdaining dishonesty. And this difference in expectation is a potential root of conflict in the already-problematic term “peer tutor”: the student, rushed and rushing, uncomfortable, believing that writing is more art than craft, has no way to assess some of the most preliminary notions of what good writing entails, indeed, what good writing even is. At the same time, the tutor must forgo the easy—and unethical—temptation merely to proofread the paper and send the student on his way. Stephen North’s memorable and famous phrase from “The Idea of a Writing Center,” in Zen tutoring, turns from maxim to mantra, repeated at meetings, in sessions, and in the tutor’s mind: “Better writers, not necessarily—or immediately—better texts” (73).

We in composition often think of this distinction between writer and text as one example of “process” versus “product,” but as all working tutors (and instructors) know, this division breaks down for every panicked student rushing to make a deadline or raise a grade. Over the process/product dichotomy, Zen offers an alternative, the third “p”: we can see writing—and, by extension, tutoring—as a practice. Practicing writing, for Goldberg, and tutoring, for writing center tutors, encompasses exercise and perfor-

mance, but also a whole way of living. As Goldberg explains, “Like running, the more you do it, the better you get at it. . . . Through practice you actually get better. You learn to trust your deep self more and not give in to your voice that wants to avoid writing” (11). The same is true for tutoring. The obstacle to tutoring is tutoring. The path to tutoring, of course, is, again, tutoring.

This tautology makes Gamache’s exhortation to search “for the unique approach to this particular student” (3) and to “see learning as a process engaged in by the student and knowledge as the components of that student’s actions” (3) even more valuable. Yet at the same time, while Zen tutoring requires Gamache’s aforementioned self-consciousness, it also requires a kind of self-disappearance, or what Goldberg calls “the beginner’s mind, the first way I thought and felt about writing” (5). The tutor has much to remember—about the writer, the assignment, the rhetorical situation, the tutoring process, all the components of tutor training and handbooks, and, perhaps not incidentally, that she may be observed by other tutors, students, or even the director. But she must also, in a sense, forget. Richard Coe, in “The Zen of Writing as Social/Symbolic Action” thinks of this process as “the actual in-the-presence-of-students performance . . . [that is] here-and-now alive” (37). More than practical compensation—for the student, to get a good grade; for the tutor, to earn a positive report or a paycheck; for Coe himself, “to get a publication on my CV” (40)—“Zen and the art of rhetoric,” Coe explains, “is its own reward” (38).

Like the tutoring sessions and personal motivations, then, writing center tutors themselves often exemplify contradiction. They are frequently adventuresome perfectionists, willing to take risks and have fun with writing and teaching, even while frequently holding both their students and themselves to the most rigorous, sometimes even rigid standards. They are consummate naturals: that is, writers in possession of finely honed skills, who labor over and revise papers so that they can look like casually brilliant first drafts. They are pragmatic romantics, aware of the enormous practical applications and implications of language even as they often specialize in English, the major that *New Yorker* cartoons still won’t leave alone (i.e., “He’s an English major? His family must be rich”). They are humble decision makers, maintaining humility and cheer while frequently appearing to be, if not actually acting as, authority figures. Driven but modest, they are critical advocates.

In the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, Leigh Ryan refers to tutors’ multiple roles (an idea explored more fully by Muriel Harris, as Ryan acknowledges) as “the many hats tutors wear”: “the ally,” “the coach,” “the commentator,” “the collaborator,” “the writing ‘expert,’” and “the counselor” (22-24). Her point is that students want, expect, or need any number of different skills or sentiments, from being “sympathetic, encouraging, and, best of all, supportive and helpful” (23) to helping students to “establish goals and explaining what work lies ahead” (23), among many others. But to me the notion of hats, or even roles, doesn’t quite capture the incongruous character of what it means to be a peer tutor, as the goal of the peer and tutor are, sadly, frequently adversarial. While the hat trick may be a way for beginning tutors to understand the larger concept of rhetoric, or tutoring as a kind of performance, the best tutors don’t really switch roles, or don hats, at all; instead, they embody them. (Roles, not hats.) They are multitudes. Tutoring takes the ability to see from the perspective of both the beginner and the master, to examine from multiple points of view, to feel both a measure of discontent with a student’s work along with unfailing empathy for the student him or herself. Tutors must feel a moment-by-moment awareness and sense of seeing deeply into the nature of things through direct experience, while simultaneously maintaining a critical distance, all while keeping one eye on the student, another eye on the paper, and a third eye, mixing spiritual metaphors, on the clock.

While the effective tutoring session must remain focused, functioning like an essay itself—with a sense of purpose, clarity of reason, and supportive examples; with a sense of beginning, middle, and end—it must at the same time recall Goldberg’s point that “learning to write is not a linear process. There is

no logical A-to-B-to-C way to become a good writer. One neat truth about writing cannot answer it all. To do writing practice means to deal ultimately with your whole life” (3). No wonder potential tutors are reluctant. While Goldberg’s book ostensibly focuses on creative writing, her points are applicable across genre. For what is rhetoric if not the acknowledgement that there is no single effective way to write, but rather a combination of discursive modes, purposes, audiences, and styles? In other words, one approach, one rule, or one “truth,” in keeping with Goldberg, is not enough. Exploring these possibilities, then, becomes a metaphor for understanding what exactly goes on during a writing tutorial, except that, again referring to Goldberg, “each time is a journey with no maps” (5).

Similarly, in “Writing Under the Bodhi Tree,” Erec Smith, like Gamache, sees Zen’s applicability to tutoring writing, but, like Goldberg, warns against simplistic solutions:

Writing consultants must never bring preconceived notions or a strict methodology to any tutoring session. This erases the individual and his or her specific situation and replaces them with a ready-made issue, or attempts to solve a problem with a ready-made solution. We must not be attached to particular ways of doing things. We must not be attached to the idea of mastery (or any ideas, really). We must let the student writer and the particular writing situation dictate our behaviors.

Zen, then, provides many rules for tutors (Smith’s “We must...” constructions), the first being to eschew rules. In keeping, Ray Bradbury’s *Zen in the Art of Writing* captures this contradiction by juxtaposing three signs: “WORK,” “RELAXATION,” and “DON’T THINK” (139). After playfully elaborating upon the signs’ obvious oppositions, Bradbury concludes by seeing “all three together in a process. For if one works, [the writer] finally relaxes and stops thinking. True creation occurs then and only then” (147). While I am not advocating that our tutors abandon frameworks or stop thinking, Bradbury’s sentiment, if not literally imperative, is appropriate: through immersion and experience, tutoring becomes, in the end, reflexive—a word suggesting Bradbury’s unthinking intuition yet Gamache’s self-consciousness, while at the same time avoiding Smith’s fear of the ready-made issue.

A reflexive or Zen practice of tutoring does not suggest gentleness, but rather, as Bradbury, quoting Wordsworth, writes, “a wise passiveness” (152). In the writing center, that passiveness may be modified; for Gamache, the tutor needs to “value free and critical thought rather than uncritical acceptance, and I encourage active involvement in learning rather than passive compliance” (4). That is, the tutor acts as advocate or facilitator but never director of, or even full collaborator on, student work. The tutor always maintains a careful, respectful, critical, and ethical distance from the student’s language and ideas, for the student’s own benefit. As the proverb (adapted here, of course), goes: revise a student’s paper, and he has a paper for a day; teach a student to revise, and he has papers for a lifetime. In the spirit of activity over passivity, tutors don’t help students to write as much as they help students to learn how to write.

The writing center director and tutor trainer is even further removed. In what quickly becomes a hall of mirrors, and a mouthful, tutor trainers should not help tutors to tutor as much as they help tutors *to learn how* to tutor students *to learn how* to write. Not my finest sentence, but I hope it captures the meaning and sentiment. The obstacle—for students, writing; for tutors, tutoring; for directors, training—is, of course, the path. And the best way out of a hall of mirrors is through reflection. But as we all learn, reflection takes training, effort, and, most of all, patience. I know new tutors will have a few tough sessions early on, even after they observe senior tutors, read manuals, write responses, attend our meetings, consult with me, and talk to each other. But they will become better tutors, and their students will become better writers, by the same means: practice.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

RHETORIC/COMPOSITION POSITION (INCLUDES DIRECTING THE WRITING CENTER) COLBY COLLEGE

Colby College announces a one-year Assistant Professor or Instructor position in Rhetoric and Composition for a specialist with an advanced degree, A.B.D. acceptable. Position begins September 1, 2008. Responsibilities include teaching introductory and advanced composition courses, directing our Writers' Center, and taking a leadership role in Writing Across the Curriculum. Experience in composition for international students is necessary. To apply, please send a cover letter that includes a brief teaching statement, descriptions of possible advanced writing courses, curriculum vitae, and three letters of recommendation to Professor Phyllis Mannocchi, Chair, English Department, Colby College, 5273 Mayflower Hill, Waterville, Maine 04901-8852.

Review of applications will begin on May 1, 2008 and continue until the position is filled. For more information about the college, please visit the Colby Web Site: <www.colby.edu>.

For decades, writing center pedagogy has shifted its emphasis from student writing to students themselves, and rightly so. But sometimes lost in the discussion is the fact that, at least in peer tutoring programs like mine, our tutors are students, too. Perhaps, then, the time has come to revise North's "better writers, not necessarily—or immediately—better texts": better tutors, not necessarily—and certainly not immediately—better tutoring. Better tutoring, of course, takes practice. ♦

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Writing Centers (continued from page 9)

can reflect on the process of writing along with the tutor. If instructors and administrators can get past the name, they will find a decent attempt to make writing easier. If the goal, however, is to produce better writers and not simply papers that meet assignment requirements, writing center administrators should take a close look at exactly what the application will and will not do. ♦

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TUTOR'S COLUMN

HELPING WRITERS WITH ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

◆ *Terry Collins (Findlay University, Findlay, Ohio)*

Three years ago, my young son was first diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, and since that time my awareness of this learning disability has dramatically increased. This relatively newly described brain dysfunction is commonly associated with the autism spectrum although people with Asperger's often possess average or above average IQs. First described in 1944 by Austrian psychiatrist Hans Asperger, this syndrome occurs in only 7 out of 100 people in the United States with males affected at a rate 4 times greater than females. Further it was only added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) in 1994. (Published by American Psychiatric Association, this document articulates specific diagnoses and symptoms of a variety of disorders, including those which require, by federal law, accommodations in primary, secondary, and post-secondary academic institutions.)

Given the rarity with which this learning disorder occurs, it might seem that developing specific learning approaches tailored to meet the needs of such students is unnecessary. In fact, according to the Office of Disability Services at my small Midwestern college, only 2 students out of a population totaling 4,600 have officially registered to receive accommodations for Asperger's. On the other hand, due to the stigmas associated with autism, some students may feel uncomfortable about revealing the fact they have Asperger's. Instead, they choose not to ask for individualized educational plans and manage their schoolwork using other techniques. Further, because a psychological description of this disorder has only recently entered the literature, there may be some students struggling with writing tasks who never have been properly diagnosed. In any event, writing tutors may be faced with helping students who evidence some of the problems associated with Asperger's even though such students have no official label attached to them. Also, the reality is that many of the tips and suggestions which would help Asperger's students are just good advice, regardless of a student's learning style.

Unfortunately, most of the distinctive symptoms of Asperger's are extremely subtle and largely pertain to problems with social and emotional behaviors. Since many people with autism are gregarious and hard-working, writing center tutors may not be able to readily identify someone with the syndrome. In fact, recognizing the syndrome is sometimes difficult even for professionals in the psychology and psychiatric fields. Some characteristic behaviors pointing to disorders on the autism spectrum include lack of eye contact, awkward body movements, and lack of appropriate facial expressions, but tutors may not be able to recognize these symptoms during a single session. Some of the most reliable and recurring symptoms, such as the inability to respond appropriately to social cues or to maintain a two-way conversation, would probably not evidence themselves until after a tutor has had subsequent meetings with the same student. The reality is that writing tutors may have to rely largely on their experience and intuition to make judgments whether or not a writer might benefit from some of the following strategies proposed for those with Asperger's or other related learning disorders.

First, when a tutor initially meets someone with Asperger's, the tutor may notice the student avoids making eye contact or looks past the tutor or over his shoulder. Although a number of other factors, such as one's culture, could contribute to such behaviors, this is a typically autistic behavior and should never be presumed to be rude or offensive. Don't ask the writer to look directly at you if you sense this request makes him uncomfortable. One of the challenges a person with Asperger's faces is the problem of sensory overload. He is sometimes unable to screen out unnecessary sensory input, and coupled with the apprehension of meeting someone new or discussing an emotional charged topic, the Asperger's writer may look away to limit discomfort.

Keeping the idea of restricting sensory overload in mind, tutors should be cognizant of the environment in which the tutoring session will take place. Cluttered work spaces, humming or overly bright fluorescent lights, or conversations from nearby tutoring sessions may make the Asperger's student uncomfortable. These types of stimuli may make the student feel overwhelmed, and the writing tutor should be sensitive to this and watch for signs or signals that the writer is being inundated by sensory elements in the environment. Students who rock back and forth, sway side to side, or exhibit repetitive motor mannerisms such as drumming or tapping their fingers may be suffering from sensory overload. These physical motions are not always signs of inattention and for the Asperger's student, they can serve as a means of filtering out unwanted sensory information.

Next, when conducting the writing session for an Asperger's student, tutors should keep in mind that these kinds of students need much more than the average amount of structure, repetition, and instruction. Because these students have difficulty with abstract concepts, explanations should be presented in as concrete a form as possible. Also, since the Asperger's student may have difficulty reading facial expressions or body language, tutors should always try to articulate clearly what they wish to convey. Refrain from using vague analogies, clichés, or idioms because the Asperger's student may take such ideas literally. I remember an occasion after a failed attempt to locate an item at a home improvement store when I told my son that it had been a "shot in the dark." He told me later that he actually thought that gunshots had been fired. Writing tutors may also witness instances where

Asperger's writers respond with a question or statement totally unrelated to the discussion at hand. Such responses are typical and indicate the failure some Asperger's students experience when trying to follow the conventions of conversation. On the other hand, an Asperger's student may assert that he has fully understood an explanation in order to avoid the embarrassment of admitting he is confused. One technique which may prove helpful is to establish a dialogue with this student's instructor. When the tutor has a clear idea of a writing assignment, she is in a better position to ensure the Asperger's student meets the writing requirement.

Along these same lines of claiming an understanding of the topic without fully grasping it, is the Asperger's student's use of vocabulary. Many people with this learning disability have rich vocabularies which seem to indicate a depth of understanding on a given topic. However, the Asperger's student often will use words without having a basic understanding of their meaning simply because he has heard these words in the context of a previous conversation. Also, people with autism often parrot or repeat dialogue from television programs or commercials. (This type of conversational repetition is called echolalia, and while the conversation may fit the situation, the Asperger's student may not always fully comprehend what is being said.) Tutors who are sensitive to this problem and who have communicated with the instructor about writing assignment requirements, are better equipped to help the Asperger's student.

Finally, tutors should be encouraged to know that the Asperger's student is often fully capable of achieving above average results in academic work. Many students with this disability have a single-minded interest in a specific topic about which they seem to know virtually everything. By focusing on this area of interest and expertise, the tutor may stimulate and encourage the Asperger's student to excel in an area where he feels confident and authoritative. Tutors should capitalize on this interest and encourage an exploration or greater development of ideas in cases where such topics are appropriate for presentation. Be aware, however, that when the Asperger's student fails, he is often unable to learn from his mistakes. Be patient, supportive, and encouraging.

If at all possible, the Asperger's student should meet with the same tutor throughout a semester. This will limit the changeability which many Asperger's students find debilitating. Further, these tutors should be prepared to repeat instructions or guidance they may have already provided in previous sessions. This is because the Asperger's student often lacks any kind of carry-over effect. In fact, tutors should assume nothing when assessing the intellectual skills of an Asperger's student. Such a student can memorize easily statistics or facts about his favorite topic, yet forget to bring a pencil or assignment sheet to his tutoring appointment. He may be able to make complex mathematical computations in his head but can't figure out how much change he'll get back from a soft drink machine. Also, the Asperger's student may assume the tutor recognizes topics or questions that have not even surfaced during a tutoring session, and in so doing, the Asperger's student will fail to ask an essential question or clarify an important point. Tutors should ask the writer to paraphrase or restate any issues about which there may be concern.

I have used the phrase "learning disability" to talk about Asperger's, but that is probably not entirely accurate. My impression of the way in which my son learns is not that he has a disability—but rather he sees the world in a different way. One description of the Asperger's person is that he is on the wrong planet and just experiencing difficulty with the customs and culture. The positive side is that when tutors deal with writers from a wide range of learning styles, we learn, too. My hope is that all of us involved in learning and growing continue to seek more and better ways to describe our world and experiences. ♦

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CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

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

Contact: Katie Stahlnecker: e-mail: ksstahlnecker@mccneb.edu, (402) 738-4529. Conference Web site: <http://www.fwp.mccneb.edu/writingcenter/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/TWCA.htm>.

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

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



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