

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E W T T E R

Volume 33, Number 1

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

September, 2008

## — FROM THE EDITOR —

As the next academic year starts, we too are delighted to be back with the new, all new Volume 33 of *WLN*. To help with tutor training now underway, Anna Kendall offers us insights into how to help students decipher the mysteries of assignment sheets, and Robert Haselwander decodes the arcane rules of the English article (“a/an” and “the”) so that tutors can assist ESL students working on mastering this confusing part of speech.

Then, for directors who are working with graduate assistant directors and also graduate students stepping into the position of assistant director, both Lyndall Nairn and Zachery Koppelman review the new collection of essays, *(E)Merging Identities: Graduate Students in the Writing Center*, edited by Melissa Nicolas. On the same topic, two peer tutors, Jessica Legg and Jessica Lott write a column for tutors about negotiating authority among tutors, assistant directors, and directors in the writing center.

Our Associate Editors, Mike Mattison and Janet Auten, have been collating a list of our reviewers, and we plan to post this list to the *WLN* Web site so that we can publicly thank them for their efforts and their collaborative work with authors who submit articles for *WLN*. If we had the budget to do so, we’d certainly host these excellent reviewers at a dinner (preferably somewhere on an exotic island paradise).

Mike, Janet, and I wish everyone a productive, rewarding academic year ahead.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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## THE ASSIGNMENT SHEET MYSTERY

◆ Anna Kendall

DePaul University, Chicago, IL

About midterm, a student scheduled an appointment to meet with me in the university’s writing center. As we took our seats around a small circular table in the middle of the room, I asked the tutee what she wanted to talk about. Pulling out a few unstapled pages of computer paper, she responded that she wasn’t sure that her essay was “what the teacher’s looking for.” And, she didn’t know how she could figure it out. My first reply was “Can I look at the assignment sheet?”

As we began discussing the assignment sheet, the student confessed that she hadn’t paid much attention to it after the teacher passed it out in class—she had only recognized that she needed to write an essay on a specific children’s book. However, she didn’t use the assignment sheet any further to locate the specific rhetorical situations the teacher had created through this writing prompt. Basically, the only thing she knew was that she had to compose an “essay.” What needed to be included in the essay? What themes was the teacher expecting? What was the expected style? The tutee didn’t know. Therefore, my tutoring mission became clear: Crack the assignment sheet code. We read over the sheet and identified the command words, like *describe* and *include*. We analyzed each paragraph. We talked through the major points the teacher was requesting. Once we de-coded the assignment sheet, once we solved

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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.

the mystery of the assignment sheet, the tutee knew immediately how her paper was to be written and what exactly she needed to include in it.

This experience, along with other similar assignment sheet situations I've encountered working in the Writing Center and with friends, has really opened my eyes, and ears, to the power of the assignment sheet. I've become somewhat of an assignment sheet advocate. I fight for its use and try to spread the word of its power in writing. And, my experience is definitely not unique; it's a common scenario in writing centers.

Muriel Harris writes that because the assignment sheet is misunderstood with such regularity, we ought to view it as a part of the education process, such as learning the language of the academic communities, learning how to understand that language, as well as how to act on that understanding (*Talking* 39). Harris continues by stating that learning how to interpret assignment sheets is often a subject in a writing center tutorial (*Talking* 39). And, as Steven M. North writes, our job as tutors "is to produce better writers, not better writing." In a writing center, our objective is to make sure that it is the writers who get changed, and not necessarily their texts (37).

I believe the assignment sheet should be studied and its de-coding should become a vital part of the composing process. The writing center is a great place where the mystery of the assignment sheet can be solved. In the following sections I'll briefly discuss the composing process and the research that has been produced about the planning phase. I'll also explain why the assignment sheet is such a powerful text in the classroom. And, most importantly, I'll describe how writing tutors can help students work with assignment sheets and understand the role they play in their own writing.

### THE COMPOSING PROCESS: PLANNING

Many scholars write that a major component of the composing process is "planning" (Stotsky 37). According to Linda Flower, this process involves developing and refining one's goals (Flower 373). The planning process involves several sub-processes, such as generating ideas, organizing, and goal setting (Flower 372). According to a tutoring handbook, writers attempt to answer the "planning questions," such as the following: What is known about the topic? What is the purpose? Who is the audience? (Gillespie and Lerner 15). During this phase, students may use a number of invention activities, such as brainstorming, clustering, and freewriting to answer their planning questions (*St. Martin's* 200).

### ASSIGNMENT SHEETS IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

As described above, much of the planning process involves reading assignments and then using invention activities to generate material for composing papers. An analysis of the assignment sheet is also a useful activity for students attempting to compose papers. This should become a staple sub-process within the planning process. This is important because the assignment sheet is an important text within the university; the assignment sheet is a text written by instructors and affects the rhetorical situations within which students must compose, and the assignment sheet is frequently misunderstood by students.

While often misunderstood by students, the assignment sheet is an important text within the university. It's important because it is written within the language of the academic discourse community. As David Bartholomae writes, students must learn to speak the language of those members in the university community and try on the particular ways of knowing, selecting, and evaluating that define the discourse of the community (589).

In order to learn how to compose in the discourse of the university community, students must include assignment sheets as a critical component of the planning process. Such analysis is important because assignment sheets complicate the student writer's rhetorical situations—assignment sheets are texts written by teachers for the students, who are the readers (audience) and must negotiate between this text and that of the text they are asked to compose. Anis Bawarshi claims that the writing prompt, like any other genre, “organizes and generates the conditions within which individuals perform their activities” (127).

Most importantly, though, the analysis of assignment sheets should be incorporated into the planning process because students often misunderstand assignment sheets, as well as struggle with them. One reason for this struggle is that the students may not understand the language of the assignment sheet (Harris, *Talking* 38). Students may also become overwhelmed by particular verbs in the sheets, such as *analyze* and *compare* (Harris, *Talking* 39).

## STRATEGIES FOR WRITING TUTORS

The writing center is a great place where students can learn to solve the mystery of the assignment sheet. This conclusion is based on the plethora of research that illustrates how collaborative learning is beneficial for students. It has been shown that active learning is more effective and students can learn a lot from working with each other (Coe and Gutierrez 262). Also, as Harris notes, when describing teacher feedback on papers, the tutor's role is one of translator or interpreter, in which he or she turns the teacher's language into the student's language (*Talking* 37). And, as Kenneth Bruffee notes, the tutors bring “knowledge of the conventions of discourse” to the tutorial (644).

There are several ways tutors can help students incorporate assignment sheets into their planning processes—by de-coding the assignment sheet, identifying the problem and solution within the writing prompt, discussing strategy words, and describing the rhetorical situation.

### • DE-CODE THE ASSIGNMENT SHEET

Tutors can help students learn how to de-code the assignment sheets they are given before they begin other sub-processes during planning. Linda Simon writes that by helping students de-code assignments, we may persuade them that the writing process begins way before they begin to actually compose (155). Tutors can show tutees how they would de-code the assignment sheet, such as identifying the key sentences in which the instructor directs the students on what and how to compose. The tutors can also model for the students how they would de-code the writing prompt. As Harris notes, showing is a valuable tool because “it can bring alive for the student a writing process or strategy that has seemed shrouded in the mystery of textbook descriptions” (*Teaching* 68). Also, Harris writes that helping students to get the “feel” for some component of writing is something that tutors can accomplish in a tutorial (*Talking* 33). Tutors can also practice de-coding their assignment sheet while sitting next to their tutees, which is beneficial because the tutor can answer questions as the student works (as well as provide encouragement) (*Talking* 34). Understanding how and why they must de-code these sheets may reduce the chances that students will misinterpret the premises of their assignments.

“The writing center is a great place where the mystery of the assignment sheet can be solved.”

During the tutorial I described in the opening of this article, I showed the tutee how she could de-code her assignment sheet. I showed her how I often take highlighters to mark the key sentences in the writ-

# NEWS

**Call for Proposals  
Michigan Writing Center Association  
Fall Conference  
October 4, 2008  
Livonia, Michigan  
“Reaching Out: The Campus, The  
Community, and Beyond”**

This year’s conference theme focuses on various ways in which a writing center might extend its services, concerns, and commitments outside the center itself. Satellite sites, collaboration with other units or programs, community service, and service learning are just a few possibilities.

Needed Info for Proposal: Send Title, Contact information, desired format (Round Table, Panel, etc.), equipment needs, and short blurb for the conference program to Ann Russell @ arussel@madonna.edu. Send form and two attachments to Ann Russell, Writing Program Director, Madonna University, 36600 Schoolcraft Road, Livonia, MI 48150-1173, or e-mail to arussell@madonna.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://www.miwritingcenters.org>>

Due Date for Proposals: September 12.

ing prompt. I pointed out the keys words, or verbs, along with the supporting text, which tells students what, and how, they are going to write.

## • IDENTIFY A PROBLEM, IDENTIFY A SOLUTION

Tutors can help students learn that an assignment sheet poses a problem, which must be solved before students begin composing. Students must learn to identify that problem (discovering what it is they are supposed to write) and to identify the solution (how they are to go about writing their response to that problem). In the tutorial, tutors can work with students collaboratively to work out the problem (Bruffee 637). As Richard M. Coe and Kris Gutierrez write, “proper and precise problem-definition is often a prerequisite to efficient problem-solution” (262). Tutors can then help students practice strategies for identifying solutions. The recognition of possible strategies, as Harris claims, is part of what Linda Flower describes as the kinds of knowledge writers need—such as “reading a situation and setting appropriate goals” (Harris, *Talking* 33). Tutors can show or model how they would identify both the problem and solution created by the assignment sheet.

In some tutorials I’ve had, the major problem is that the students don’t know what type of paper they are being asked to compose. Once we identify this problem, we can work through the writing prompt to identify the solution. After spending some time reading over the prompt, identifying what actions the student needs to take (*argue*, *discuss*, etc.), and what needs to be included (outside sources, references to the textbook, etc.), the student discovers what type of paper the teacher is expecting and finds the solution. In one tutorial, after we went through this process, a student’s paper describing American soccer became a paper arguing why American soccer is not as popular as European futbol.

## • DISCUSS STRATEGY WORDS

Before students can begin composing, it’s important that they understand what action they must execute: *analyze* something, *describe* something, or *argue* something. Therefore, tutors can help students by showing them how it’s important to look for, what the *St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing* has labeled, the “strategy words” on assignment sheets. Students must learn that understanding these words is important, because the words tell them what strategy they are to use in composing, and they determine the form of their written response (95). A discussion of these strategy words will guide students to a more complex understanding of how their essays will be evaluated (96). Tutors can explain what each of the major verbs mean, such as which ones dictate style and form and which ones direct the discussion of the topic (Simon 151). Tutors can help students realize that instructors will likely use a number of verbs, and tutors can help students comprehend what the most common verbs mean (Simon 151). The verbs most commonly used in assignment sheets include the following: *discuss*, *analyze*, *compare*, *contrast*, *define*, *describe*, *evaluate*, *explain*, and *summarize* (*St. Martin’s* 96). These are words that are also common within the discourse of the academic community. And, these words signify the rhetorical action that students must take as they compose; the rhetorical action is a focus of the reader’s (teacher’s) evaluation.

In all of the previous examples, one of the major benefits for the tutees was identifying the strategy words in the writing prompts. The verbs in the assignment sheets helped the tutees realize that an essay really isn’t just an essay—it’s the umbrella term for a specific writing task that asks students to *analyze* and *include*. And, a mere *description* of something does not *argue* how it is better (or worse) than something else.

## • DESCRIBE THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

According to Gerard A. Hauser, rhetorical situations are situations that contain multiple features, which include “the persons involved, the events that involve them, the object of their conscious attention within the context of the salient events, and the relations among the persons, events, and objects”

(Hauser 33). The writing prompt is a genre that contains multiple features, which consequently creates students as both readers (of the teachers' assignment sheets) and writers (of their own texts). Tutors can help tutees become aware that they must understand the rhetorical situations of the assignment sheet before they begin composing. David Sudol writes that on the first day of his composition classes, he discusses college composition with his students, and he presents a mini-lecture on the rhetorical situations. Sudol presents this information to his students because they are expected to understand the rhetorical situations of future writing assignments, and he also includes rhetorical situations in his assignment sheets (52). This activity can also apply to the writing center tutorial. Tutors can explain and describe the rhetorical situations of their tutee's assignment sheets. It is important that tutors help their tutees understand that the rhetorical situations from which they compose are often made known implicitly through the writing prompts.

During several writing tutorials, I've realized that some students' papers are not at all a reflection of what the teacher has laid out in the assignment sheet. That part doesn't shock me. Assignment sheets are often misunderstood. What shocks me, however, are the students' deliberate decisions not to follow the writing prompts' guidelines and to continue writing as they have, because they "like it better that way." And it is often these same students who explain that "the teacher doesn't get" their writing when they come in after receiving a poor grade. I think that these students could benefit from a tutor helping them to understand the rhetorical situations presented through the writing prompt.

## CONCLUSION

The assignment sheet, as illustrated through my experiences as a writing tutor, is often neglected or misunderstood by student writers. Therefore, tutors, as well as instructors, should acknowledge that the time spent interpreting the assignment, as well as understanding the rhetorical situations, is far more valuable than the time spent evaluating a finished product (Herrington 387). If tutors work with their tutees on analyzing the assignment sheet and providing strategies for interpreting it, then students may not only understand the assignment better but also become aware that the assignment sheet is a significant text that must be incorporated into their planning processes. The writing prompt should be considered a valuable aspect within the composing process, because it's a text produced by a member of the academic discourse community, a community that students must try to appropriate. The writing prompt is a genre that complicates students' rhetorical situations from which they compose. And, most importantly, the assignment sheet is often misinterpreted by students. Tutors can help students understand and incorporate assignment sheets into their own composing processes by showing students how their assignment sheets can be de-coded and how they can identify the problem and solution. Students need to know how they can interpret the various strategy words, and how they can describe the rhetorical situations. In the writing center, tutor and tutee can work together to solve the mystery of the assignment sheet. ♦

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# NEWS

## Summer Institute Bibliography

Shareen Grogan and Rebecca Day Babcock are compiling a bibliography of published works that can trace their genesis back to one of the Summer Institutes. These do not need to be papers about the summer institute, but rather works that were somehow generated from the SI experience, for instance, the idea for the article was sparked at the SI, collaborators met at the SI, the paper was one of the writing projects from your SI writing group, etc. In addition, we would like the story behind the article and how the SI contributed to its existence. Send your citations and stories to babcock\_r@utpb.edu and sgrogan@nu.edu.

## (THE) ENGLISH ARTICLE AND ELL STUDENTS

◆ Robert Hasehwander  
University of Missouri-Kansas City  
Kansas City, MO

English Language Learner (ELL) students make up a significant portion of the students in the United States. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, a language other than English is spoken in 17.9% of American homes (State), and the number of ELL speakers is projected to continue rising. In a climate of increasing diversity, it is important for writing centers at universities to be sensitive to the needs of these students, who often frequent writing centers to better their English writing ability. As the CCC's "Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers" urges, universities need "to recognize the regular presence of second-language writers in writing classes . . . and to develop instructional and administrative practices that are sensitive to their linguistic and cultural needs" (670).

Research indicates that "university professors and employers find ESL errors distracting and stigmatizing" (Ferris 9). Because of these biases, these students' identity as ELLs can become more than a demographic demarcation; it may become a social and economic handicap. These students are highly intelligent and motivated, but their difficulty in mastering English is often used to mark them as different, to belittle, and even to mock them. To help these students succeed in their goals, we as tutors may need to provide them with extra, focused assistance. There are many aspects of English that challenge ELL students; however, one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome is mastery of the English article. Although the English language contains only two articles: "a/n" and "the," their usage is defined more by exceptions than by regular rules, so they are challenging to master, especially for students whose native language does not contain articles. For the ELL students who speak languages such as Japanese, Mandarin, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, and even Cherokee, mastery of the English article is more than an inconvenience; it is a daunting intellectual challenge (Dryer 156). When an ELL student has progressed in his/her studies, there will come a time when s/he needs assistance with the finer points of grammar, such as the usage of the article. The purpose of this paper is to seek pragmatic solutions to helping ELL students gain mastery over the English article and to provide tutors with some of the skills and knowledge they will need to provide that kind of assistance. Many writing tutors rely on their innate understanding of English, which comes from speaking it for many years, rather than a technical understanding of the grammatical rules and linguistic structures. Unfortunately, as many tutors (I among them) have found, our innate understanding of the language is not always sufficient to assist ELL students. Before tutors can begin to help an ELL student with the article, it is important that tutors first understand the article for themselves.

### THE ARTICLE

The article is only one aspect of the grammatical structure that challenges ELL students. ELL students often encounter confusion with the larger class that articles belong to: the class of language known as the identifier. Identifiers function as their title suggests; they provide additional identifying information about the noun they modify. In English they usually communicate information like quantity (such as "many ducks") and specificity (such as "her bag" or "that paper"). Fortunately, most identifiers are physical and visual in nature, so they are easily explained across cultural and language barriers. Articles can be explained in similar ways, but their usage is often more complex (and more difficult to represent visually) than most other identifiers.

The two English articles, "a/n" and "the," can be thought of in general terms thus:

a/n = indefinite (non-specific) article

*Do you have **a** book?*

the = definite (specific) article

*Do you have **the** book?*



**CALL FOR PROPOSALS**  
**MidAtlantic Writing Centers**  
**Association Conference**

**York, PA**

**March 27-28, 2009**

**Conference Theme: "A Firm League  
of Friendship": Declaring the  
Interdependence of Writing  
Programs and Writing Centers**

**Keynote speaker: Muriel Harris**

The 20<sup>th</sup> Annual MAWCA Conference will be held in York, PA, where in 1777 the Articles of Confederation were signed. Just as the founders sought shared and productive roles for the states and the federal government, writing centers and writing programs have also sought to maintain, to borrow from Article 3, a "a firm league of friendship with each other." The 2009 MAWCA Conference invites proposals from all stakeholders in the work of writing instruction: peer tutors, professional tutors, writing instructors, writing center and writing program directors.

Though we invite presentations on all facets of writing center work, we especially seek proposals that speak to the rich interdependence of writing programs and writing centers. And, in the democratic spirit of fellowship and conversation, we also encourage presentations that are meant to spur collaboration and discussion rather than reading of formal papers. We also welcome multiple modes of presentation that make use of available technologies—audio, video, posters, visuals, and interactive workshops.

For the detailed Call for Proposals, and more information on the conference, accommodations, etc., please visit the conference Web site at <[www.ycp.edu/lrc/mawca2009](http://www.ycp.edu/lrc/mawca2009)> or e-mail conference coordinators: Cynthia Crimmins ([ccrimmin@ycp.edu](mailto:ccrimmin@ycp.edu)) or Dominic Delli Carpini ([dcarpini@ycp.edu](mailto:dcarpini@ycp.edu)).

In the first case, the article "a" is indefinite, referring generally to any book, whereas the second case is definite, referring to some specific book. This basic function of the article can be represented as a part of the continuum of identifiers:

*The article as a marker of specificity.*

No article is used when the noun refers to a concept	dog
"A" is used when the noun is unfamiliar	a dog
"The" is used when the noun is more familiar	the dog
"Your," "her," etc. A determiner is used when the noun is familiar and owned.	your dog

This specificity is strongly tied to the other major function of the article, which is to act as a discursive marker of novelty. In their function as a marker of novelty, articles indicate whether the noun is familiar (known/old) or unfamiliar (novel/new). Unfamiliar nouns are indicated using "a" and familiar nouns are indicated using "the." The status of a noun as either familiar or unfamiliar may change in the course of an exchange.

For example: Please give me *an* apple.  
Thank you, *the* apple was good.

The apple is a new thing when it is introduced in the first sentence, so it takes the indefinite article "a/n." In the next sentence, the reader knows of the apple's existence, so the apple becomes a familiar noun, and takes the familiar article "the." This example conforms nicely to the grammatical rules; however, articles in the real world rarely work out in such nice forms. They often fall into gray areas of cultural context, where the reasons for the article's usage may not be clear to an ELL student. For example: *A horse walks into a bar and the bartender says, "Why the long face?"* The bar in question is a new thing when it is first introduced at the beginning of the sentence, so it takes the indefinite article "a." During the course of the sentence, the reader or listener implies the existence of a bartender based on the existence of the bar. Based on this assumption, an assumption specific to the cultural context, the bartender becomes a familiar noun, and takes the familiar article "the." The two other articles in this sentence function on similar cultural assumptions. "A horse" is introduced at the beginning of the sentence, and "the long face" which is seen later in the sentence refers to the shape of the horse's face. Both sets of articles in this example function as both markers of specificity and markers of novelty. This is because, in the application of speech in a cultural context, these functions of specificity and novelty are strongly related, yet frustratingly separate. Even to a native English speaker, the article's usage is complex enough to be elusive. The function of an article as a discursive marker of novelty can be seen below. Note that, even in this example, the functions of specificity and novelty are nearly inseparable.

*The article as a marker of novelty*

"A"	Jack ordered a sarsaparilla because he was very thirsty.
"The"	John drank the entire beverage.

Finally, in addition to these basic functions of the article, there are a number of exceptions to these general rules, such as proper place nouns, common knowledge nouns, noun phrases, etc.

For example: *the* Pacific Ocean

But not: *the* Lake Ontario

For more specific instances of exceptions in article usage, consult handbooks on grammar, such as Ascher's book and also Lane and Lange's book.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Writing Center Director University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

This is a full-time, non-tenure track position in an innovative, busy center that offers both onsite and online service <<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb>>.

The Director of the Writing Center is the principal administrator with responsibility of the overall day-to-day operation of the Center. The primary responsibilities include: administration, management, and supervision of the Center's programs, budget, and personnel. The director also represents the Writing Center services and interests to the University community and serves on committees related to the Center's mission. The director guides the Center's strategic planning and envisions and develops new initiatives.

Qualifications and Experience: PhD preferred, master's degree required in a related field, with at least three to five years of writing center administrative experience, preferably in a research-based college or university setting.

Salary: Commensurate with experience  
Closing Date: Open until filled  
Applicants must submit a cover letter and CV electronically via <<http://hr.unc.edu/jobseekers>> and submit three letters of reference to Shade Little, Chair, Writing Center Director Search Committee, Campus Box 3106, UNC-CH, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3106. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is an equal opportunity employer, and is strongly committed to the diversity of our faculty and staff. Women and minorities are encouraged to apply.

### HELPING ELL STUDENTS WITH THE ARTICLE

After examining some of the aspects of the article, we can see that the article is more complex than even an experienced tutor well versed in grammar might have thought. It is hardly surprising that students, especially students whose first language does not include the article, might come to the writing center seeking help. In the 1970s, a process-oriented form of composition instruction began to develop in response to the rigid grammarianism which had been the previous vogue. Consequently, the writing center that emerged from that school of thought leaned toward tutoring with a *laissez faire* approach to the writer's mechanics, choosing to focus instead on the writer's ideas. Unfortunately for ELL students, an approach that merely overlooks their struggle with mechanics does not actually help them improve their grasp of those mechanics. As Ferris says, these students require "feedback or error correction that is tailored to their linguistic knowledge and experience . . . and instruction that is sensitive to their unique linguistic deficits and needs for strategy training" (5). Ferris adds her voice to the growing chorus of those calling for writing centers to take a more active part in tutoring ELL students by bringing more focus onto mechanics.

The ELL students who come to our writing centers do suffer from a deficit, but that deficit is not the deficit model of stupidity forwarded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Pinker says, language acquisition "is guaranteed for children up to the age of six, is steadily compromised from then until shortly after puberty, and is rare thereafter" (298). There is a critical window of time for learning a language with the mastery of a native speaker, and if that window is missed, it is nearly impossible to gain complete competence in that language. "The development of language, then, involves two people negotiating . . . If there is a Language Acquisition Device, the input to it is not a shower of spoken language but a highly interactive affair" (Bruner 39). As writing tutors, we need to provide ELL students with that interaction. We need to assist them in the difficult task of learning a language after their brains are no longer biologically oriented for that learning.

The pragmatic solution is assisting students who have arrived at some stage of mastery in their English speaking/writing ability, but still have many specific grammatical problems due to their incomplete knowledge. Following the other research in this field, I propose that we, the tutors, need to provide this knowledge through what I term "experiential assistance." Experiential assistance may mean that the tutor will need to go through a student's work line by line, helping him/her pick out the mistakes that s/he has made. Though this kind of assistance might at first look like simple error correction, it is much more. As a number of studies, ranging from the late 1980s to 2001, indicate, "student writers have generally been successful in producing more accurate revisions in response to error feedback" (Ferris 15). If the tutor is merely editing, then the tutor is doing the student a disservice. What tutors should be doing is helping students build their toolkits of knowledge by helping them learn the grammatical use of articles in English. This suggestion follows the research of Cynthia Linville and others, which indicates that "[ELL] students can and do learn to become proficient editors of their own texts when given the necessary instruction" (84).

What I suggest is called "scaffolding," a concept introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross, over thirty years ago. It is a process of tutoring in which the tutor provides support to the student, "until the learner is capable of performing independently after the support is removed" (Puntambekar and Hubscher 2). Essentially, the tutor walks the student through a three-step process, first, teaching by showing, or "doing it for the student"; second, having the student do it with the tutor's assistance; and finally, allowing the student to do it alone, with only minimal guidance as needed. Traditionally in the tutoring of writing, this scaffolding has been seen as a short-term process, spanning a session or two. Experiential assistance is different from the traditional writing center's view of scaffolding. It acknowledges that ELL students may need help in the longer term, so experiential assistance involves helping these students over an extended number of sessions, which may vary from a few sessions to a few dozen sessions.



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Director of Writing Center and Writing Assessment Drexel University

Drexel University is seeking a full-time, non-tenure-track teaching faculty member to direct the University Writing Center and conduct university-wide writing and learning assessments. This individual will guide the Writing Center as it provides quality service to students from all backgrounds and majors and will take the lead in expanding the Center's offerings: developing best practices to create a community of tutors, using integrated technology to enhance tutoring services, increasing writing across the curriculum practices, advising an interdisciplinary writing assessment task force, and organizing faculty development opportunities. The Director will also use writing-studies expertise to assess writing effectiveness in majors and disciplines on campus.

The Director will have a quarter-time teaching load with a primary appointment in the Department of English & Philosophy and a secondary appointment in the Pennoni Honors College. Candidates will have a Ph.D. in composition and rhetoric, preferably with an emphasis on writing center administration, and will have experience with teaching. Qualified applicants should also have experience with

- The use of outcomes to assess the effectiveness of writing and writing programs
- The day-to-day management of a writing center, including hiring and training student tutors and working with faculty to encourage and develop superior quality writing.

Please send letter of application, c.v., & current references to:

Scott Warnock, PhD  
Director of the Freshman Writing Program  
Drexel University  
3141 Chestnut Streets  
Philadelphia, PA, 19104

The core of this idea is what Wood and Wood call "fading," which is providing as much help as the student needs, and slowly fading that assistance out as it becomes unnecessary (7). The first session might involve the tutor actually making most of the corrections for the student, and the second session might consist mostly of the student being guided to make corrections by the tutor. As the student masters the grammar, the tutor will become less of a guide and more of a resource, only offering help as needed.

It is essential to keep the goal in mind; at this stage, tutoring is about helping students learn and master complex grammatical constructs in a language that is foreign to them. Before jumping in with both feet, it's important for the tutor to determine what the student most needs help with. A good rule of thumb is to focus the tutoring session on whatever seems to detract most from the student's meaning. The thing that most detracts from the student's meaning should be the highest order concern. If that means that the entire session is focused on a grammatical point like the article, then tutors are doing what they ought to do, just as much as if they spent the entire session focused on a more traditional higher order concern like organization. Regardless of what kind of focus the session takes, extended scaffolding can be used for any concern in the student's writing, grammatical or otherwise.

Supposing that the basic scaffolding model is followed, tutors can easily determine when students have mastered the topic. As students master the topic, they will begin to catch and correct their own errors. If a student happens to skip over an article error, I call attention to the sentence to see if the student can find the error. If the student is still not able to find the error, I point it out and, if necessary, try to explain why the usage is different from other usages that the student has encountered. Either way, the essential ingredients are flexibility and patience; as tutors, we simply need to recognize when a student is struggling and be willing to provide help when it is needed.

In my experience at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Writing Center, I have had the opportunity to put this idea into practice. After working over an eight-week period with T\_\_\_\_\_, a female student from Japan, I recently noted in my tutoring journal that "she [now] tends to correct most of her plurals, many of her articles, and a decent number of her compound verbs." In my work with T\_\_\_\_\_, I applied the idea of experiential assistance, beginning with the broad grammatical ideas and narrowing to particular examples of usage in her papers. Although we continued to work together until the end of the semester, my assistance became less and less necessary, and by the end of the semester I would frequently only need to assist her with one or two corrections. As I found with T\_\_\_\_\_, the situation that confronts the tutor is not usually a situation of teaching, but of helping with the practical application of particulars in students' papers.

To communicate the basic idea of what the article is, I would strongly suggest using examples, both written and physical. This communication might begin with the article as a marker of specificity and novelty, potentially using a method similar to the examples above. Because of the language barrier, I have often found that visual and/or physical representations can be very helpful in communicating a concept. For example, when helping a student out this fall, I noticed that the UMKC writing center was decorated with small pumpkins, so I modeled specificity like so:

Give me *a* pumpkin.

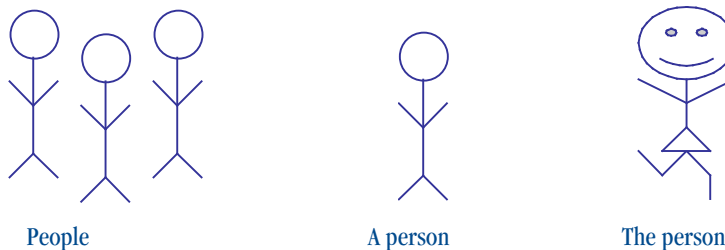
Give me *the* pumpkin.

I wrote the two phrases on a notepad in front of us and explained that *a* was general, referring to any of the pumpkins in front of us, and *the* was specific, referring only to one particular pumpkin. I was able to make my meaning clear to the student by pointing to the crowd of pumpkins and

requesting “give me *a* pumpkin,” and demonstrating that “a pumpkin” could be any pumpkin from the crowd. I next singled a particular pumpkin out, and having identified it, I asked the student to “give me *the* pumpkin.” This real-world illustration made the point better than twenty minutes of me talking, and the student nodded in understanding almost immediately.

In a similar way, illustrations can be used to communicate ideas. You don’t have to be an art major to construct a useful figure such as a simple stick figure. These can be very effective at communicating grammatical ideas. Visual examples are especially helpful for ELL students, because they overcome the language barrier without requiring the tutor to be a specialist in the student’s native language. Sometimes a picture is worth more than a thousand words.

*The article through art*



The acquisition of a new language is invariably a daunting and difficult task. The task often seems insurmountable to ELL students, but the knowledge that these students seek is innate to many writing tutors who are native English speakers. To provide the best assistance, writing tutors would benefit greatly from research outside the session to gain further linguistic and grammatical knowledge on the topics that trouble the students they are helping, including articles. Tutors without this specialized knowledge should not be discouraged, because they are still assisting the students they tutor. It is important for tutors to remember that their natural sense for the English language is imperfect; by studying the syntax of English they can be more effective tutors. ♦

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♦ (Author’s note: Special thanks to Dr. Thomas Stroik, Thomas Ferrel, Robin Sontheimer, the crew at the UMKC Writing Center, Dr. Shanti Bruce, and Cynthia Tharp.) ♦

## BOOK REVIEW

Nicolas, Melissa, Ed. *(E)Merging Identities: Graduate Students in the Writing Center*. Southlake, TX: Fountainhead, 2008. ISBN: 978-1-59871-184-4 (\$25.00, 164 pp.)

*It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's a Super Graduate Assistant in the Writing Center!*

◆ Reviewed by Lyndall Nairn, Lynchburg College, Lynchburg, VA

All writing center directors are involved with supervising tutors, whether the tutors' status is that of undergraduates, graduate students, or professional tutors. As a writing center grows, the need for an assistant director or two is likely to arise. If the writing center continues to grow, perhaps the college administrators think that creating a graduate assistant's position would be a suitable and relatively inexpensive staffing solution. Under these circumstances, the writing center director has to define the role of the new graduate assistant: how would it differ from the role of undergraduate peer tutors and from the role of the assistant director? The people in all three roles are involved with tutoring, so what makes them different from one another? Some thought provoking answers to these questions are provided by *(E)Merging Identities: Graduate Students in the Writing Center*.

The personal narratives of Mattison (Chapter One) and Singh-Corcoran (Chapter Two) reveal the uncertainty, the questioning, and the doubts of graduate assistants that are not normally addressed in tutor training literature. Mattison discusses the tension that graduate assistants feel between their dual identities of teacher/authority on the one hand and peer/student on the other. Singh-Corcoran uses the scholarship versus administration dichotomy to illustrate the relatively low status position that writing center administration occupies in the minds of most academics, including composition/rhetoric faculty. These two authors make it clear that although they do not regret their decisions to continue with writing center careers, prospective graduate assistants and their supervisors need to be aware of the awkward psychological terrain that is involved in our field. The implication for the writing center director is that graduate assistants will need some support as they sort through these complex issues of building their professional identities.

In contrast, Chapter Three, "The Tale of a Position Statement" by Eckerle, Rowan, and Watson, presents a much more outward-looking perspective. The authors stress the usefulness of the International Writing Centers' Association as a professional organization which issued the position statement that graduate assistants can apply in their own institutions to give themselves more power and clearer definitions of their work. IWCA provides support and functions as a professional resource that introduces graduate assistants to the wider writing center community beyond the immediate institutions that employ them.

The next two chapters provide contrasting stories of successful and unsuccessful graduate assistant experience in the writing center. Ryan and Zimmerelli (Chapter Four) take a positive point of view in their discussion of the writing center as a contact zone, where a wide range of relationships and situations present rich potential for graduate assistants' personal and professional growth and where the director, as the graduate assistant's mentor, plays a crucial role in this growth. However, Tirabassi, Zenger, and Gannett (Chapter Five) demonstrate that when graduate assistants are left alone in an unsupervised, unstructured writing center, then their experience can quickly deteriorate into a full-fledged disaster. These two models serve as guidelines of what to do and what not to do so that any writing center director contemplating hiring graduate assistants for the first time would have a clear idea of both ends of the spectrum.

In Chapter Six, Snively gives a clear definition of the various roles that a graduate assistant can play during a tutorial (such as a highly skilled peer tutor, an editor, and a faculty surrogate) as well as an explanation of what makes the graduate assistant different from an undergraduate peer tutor. Such a sophisticated level of tutoring skills does not emerge overnight; thus, a director supervising graduate assistants must address the question of how to nurture their professional development. This issue is the topic of Chapter Seven by LeCluyse and Mendelsohn, who describe two case studies involving the training of graduate assistants. In both models, the graduate assis-

# TAKE NOTE

## CCCC 2009 WRITING CENTER COLLABORATIVE

The all-day Writing Center Collaborative at the 2009 CCCC in San Francisco this year different in that the Collaborative will be organized independently of CCCC, much like the Research Network Forum, but it will continue to be scheduled on the Wednesday set aside for workshops.

### CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Writing centers exist in all shapes, sizes, and settings: they are housed in libraries, learning centers, English departments, independent units, and online; their administrators and tutors are graduate and undergraduate students, full and part-time faculty members and staff, community members, and high school students; and they serve diverse populations and have distinct missions. Yet essential in the work of even very different writing centers are the geographic, administrative, and disciplinary connections they make. Through their scholarship, their conversations, and their practices, they build bridges that sustain larger communities.

These connecting bridges are what we hope this year's table sessions will highlight. The IWCA CCCC's Collaborative planning committee invites you to share the bridges that you are making with other centers or centaurs, the connections that you've made within your institutions that sustain writing center work, and the links you've made with your communities outside of your campus sites. The program will include both full group and small concurrent table sessions.

This year's chairs are Nathalie Singh-Corcoran (Nathalie.Singh-Corcoran@mail.wvu.edu) and Carol Peterson Haviland (cph@csusb.edu). Proposals should be e-mailed to both chairs by October 15; proposers will be informed of their proposals' status by November 17.

tants take a leadership role and are in control of their own training. Taking up the challenge of being responsible for their own training seems an appropriate approach for the development of future writing center professionals.

From the perspective of the writing center director, Chapter Eight, "Collusion and Collaboration: Concerning Authority in the Writing Center" by Rollins, Smith, and Westbrook, is the least helpful chapter in the book. These authors analyze the transcripts of three tutorials in order to prove that tutors are obliged to go to extraordinary lengths to maintain the illusion of collaboration with clients during tutorials. The authors suggest that collaboration cannot always be genuine because graduate assistants usually have more inherent authority and extensive experience than tutees. Nevertheless, having been indoctrinated with the collaborative ideology of writing centers, the graduate assistants are reluctant to be directive in their tutoring; instead, they resort to such techniques as referring to embedded authorities, rephrasing statements as questions, and using inclusive pronouns to mask the power imbalance that is inevitable in the tutor-tutee relationship. Rollins, Smith, and Westbrook's analysis is not completely convincing because these same techniques can also be viewed as ways to engage tutees in a discussion of their papers, to promote the writers' ownership of their writing, and to encourage critical thinking about the texts under consideration. When the authors focus on the tension between directive instruction and collaboration, they are addressing an important issue in writing center work; however, instead of considering these two options as mutually exclusive, graduate assistants and their supervisors would find it more helpful to view them as two complementary approaches to achieving the overarching writing center goal of producing better writers.

Lucas Niiler's attitude in Chapter Nine contrasts with the preceding chapter as he suggests that the graduate assistants in his writing center feel no resentment because they are not obliged to conduct their tutorials according to an imposed ideology. Instead, Niiler sees his graduate assistants embracing and developing their authority in very positive ways. Using discourse analysis, Niiler explains how graduate assistants can use speech acts to acquire territory, to warn others away from their territory, to defend it, and to mark its boundaries as four ways of defining their position and authority in the writing center. At first this militaristic terminology of territorialist theory seems inappropriate for the writing center, but these speech acts do explain the increasing confidence of Niiler's graduate assistants. The appeal of his approach lies in its potential to offer graduate assistants a means of thinking about their role on a larger, more political scale, rather than focusing more narrowly on techniques for conducting tutorials, as most tutor training literature does.

Overall, *(E)Merging Identities* provides writing center directors with ways of defining the roles of graduate assistants and of guiding their professional development. The graduate assistant's role is different from that of the undergraduate peer tutors, many of whom will not continue with writing center work after they obtain their degrees. The graduate assistant's role is also different from that of the assistant director, who has had more writing center experience, who probably has a graduate degree already, and who takes on more responsibility. As Nicolas explains, for two or three years the graduate assistants are "in the place(s) in-between" these other two identities (1). As well as proving that those places in-between can offer graduate assistants opportunities for growth as writing center professionals, *(E)Merging Identities* can certainly assist writing center directors as they guide their graduate assistants on the journey through those places. Once they have completed the graduate school section of their journey, graduate assistants who have read this book will be well equipped to redefine their roles when faced with other new situations later in their careers.

### ◆ Review by Zachery W. Koppelman, Boise State University

*(E)Merging Identities: Graduate Students in the Writing Center* gives an excellent view into the events and lives of graduate students in writing centers and writing center administration. The shift from pure student to quasi-faculty is akin to walking into a Burkean parlor: disconcerting. And at times academia is three or four parlors occurring at the same time. So hearing from people who have made the leap into the conversation and lived to tell the tale—and stayed in the field—enhances new graduate students' efforts to persevere and excel. The authors' discussion is blunt, honest, and at times overwhelming. Each chapter takes the reader into the intra-workings of a person, or persons, who has merged, emerged, and marked the path for the rest of us.

The book contains honest narratives (chapters 1, 2, 3, 4), practical advice (chapters 4, 6, 7), analysis (chapter 8), theoretical discussions (chapters 7, 9), and even a horror story (chapter 5). As a graduate student, I find all the chapters are interesting and informative, but some chapters (1, 2, 3, and 8) give a better introduction into the field and discussion, which I view as the greatest benefit the book offers to graduate students.

In the first chapter, Michael Mattison presents a letter for his younger self. While the frame is light-hearted, the questions and concerns he raises are anything but. It is easy to take the chapter not as a letter to a younger Mattison, but as a letter to any graduate student entering the field. Aside from some specific references to his career and current situation, the situations he presents are, if not universal, thematically relevant to any aspiring graduate student. How should a TA and writing center tutor work with a student who is a peer TA's class? How does a TA park the 'teacher' at the door of the writing center? How does a tutor respond in class to a fellow TA who gives poor comments on his students' work and then sends them to the writing center? And just what *is* our identity? While few of the questions are answered, the discussion prepares new graduate students for the challenges that will face them.

Nathalie Singh-Corcoran takes up where Mattison leaves off. Chapter two reflects on the place of writing centers, and writing center work, in the dichotomy between scholars and administrators. This chapter offers an informative break-down of basic academic politics and perceptions, a set of notes about the on-going conversation as it were. She mixes her narrative with more scholarly work and even a touch of theory, creating a foil to the accusations levied by Richard McNabb and others. Singh-Corcoran readily concedes that "amateurish...narratives" (32) are common in writing center publications, but she argues "writing centers exist amid narrative: they are places where storytelling and storymaking happen" (34). She calls for "writing center workers . . . to participate in meaningful intellectual work" (35) to help legitimize writing center scholarship and bring new ideas and voices into writing centers. As a concluding point, she calls for "[English studies] to take notice of service and pedagogy and acknowledge their academic currency" (35).

Anything that can make graduate students' lives' better is a good thing; in chapter three, Julie Eckerle, Karen Rowan, and Shevaun Watson tell the tale, give the details, and explain the reasoning that resulted in the International Writing Center Association's "Statement on Graduate Student Writing Center Administration." The statement, and its history, is important to all graduate students entering writing centers because "[it] contributes to the vitality of writing and our professional community . . . by stating explicit goals for achieving greater recognition for graduate administration" (42). The authors' narrative is rich with details and examples, pointing to the exact reasoning for portions of the statement. I found their discussion intriguing and enlightening: intriguing because of the scope and challenges they faced, enlightening because of how well they accomplished their goal. For new graduate students—aside from the benefits to their standard of living and education—this chapter gives a clear view of their "ideal set of working conditions" (42) and their potential.

Text analysis is not always a great introduction to a new field. However, Brooke Rollins, Trixie G. Smith, and Evelyn Westbrook provide an excellent explanation and analysis of a concern central to many writing center discussions: authority. They define and explain concerns about authority in the writing center, what the prevailing views are, and provide a detailed analysis of three session transcripts. They highlight and discuss the awkward and convoluted steps their writing assistants take to avoid being directive and conveying authority. They also highlight the steps *the writers* take to avoid giving or taking authority. After the many examples of conversational dysfluency and extraordinary effort on the part of both the writing assistant and writer, their critique of authority-less collaboration in writing centers provides new graduate students in the writing center an important primer on a central writing center debate.

I found all the chapters thought provoking and insightful. However, as a graduate student in a writing center, I found these four chapters to be the most useful. As I—and other graduate students—move through the field and encounter the challenges presented by the various authors, I am sure the other chapters will become more relevant and beneficial. ♦

*(Author's note: In the interest of full disclosure, Zachery W. Koppelman works with Michael Mattison as the Boise State Writing Center Graduate Assistant.) ♦*

# TUTOR'S COLUMN

## TUTORS BEHAVING BADLY: NEGOTIATING AUTHORITY IN WRITING CENTERS

◆ *Jessica L. Legg and Jessica L. Lott*  
*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*  
*Indiana, Pennsylvania*

We recently attended the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW) held at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where the theme was authority in the writing center. We were part of a larger group of tutors who decided to narrow down the general theme of authority to negotiating authority. The two of us focused on negotiating authority between tutors. We commonly read about and discuss the relationships between tutors and students, but we never hear about the relationships between tutors. Negotiating authority between tutors can affect how a writing center is run and may factor into tutoring sessions. The starting point for our work largely came from an assignment from Jessica Lott's class on ethnographic research methods. She asked three tutors to rank the tutors at our Writing Center about how much influence each one had in how the Writing Center is run, which naturally brought up the issue of authority. We began to discuss factors such as seniority, experience with writing, professionalism, motivation to make change in the Writing Center, and others. We also explored how all of these ideas affect the Writing Center. By bringing up these issues, we hoped to start a dialogue about a topic that, though often touchy, has a great impact on the Writing Center and the work that we do there. We would like to look at the hierarchies that may develop between tutors, authority's role between tutors and directors, what happens when a tutor renounces his/her responsibility, and how tutors respect each other's authority. Drawing upon experiences in our Writing Center, we will discuss how these topics may play out in writing centers at large.

### Hierarchies

The most direct outcome of this ranking produced some insight as to the nature of hierarchies in our Writing Center. In our experience, hierarchies within the tutors often form, with some tutors having more influence in how the Writing Center functions than others. However, it is important to note that these hierarchies are neither rigid nor divisive in our experience. Rather, they are tendencies that help reveal how decisions are made in the Writing Center. In order to learn more about this, Jessica Lott selected three informants, trying to represent different groups of tutors, in order to do a pile-sorting activity. She chose informants from different social groups, representing tutors who had been at the Writing Center for different amounts of time, who would be able to speak freely about others at the Center, and who knew most or all of the tutors. There were several characteristics used by the informants to create the ranking: experience with writing, experience as a tutor, participation/insight at staff meetings, motivation to make changes, performance in tutoring sessions, the director's response to them, general attitude at work, level of professionalism, and ability to give opinions freely. While some of these characteristics are based on previous knowledge and experience, others rely more on personality and perceived commitment to the Writing Center. These findings would not be the same as in other writing centers, where issues such as academic level (graduate versus undergraduate) would have a greater emphasis than at our Writing Center. However, what we found at our Writing Center can be used to initiate discussion in other writing centers because they have a broad focus.

### Tutors, Assistant Directors, and Directors

Issues of authority regarding writing center tutors are not autonomous, but rather are affected by outside influences, most directly by the director and assistant director. Our particular Writing Center has a Director, who is a professor from the English Department, and an Assistant Director, who is a PhD candidate in the composition program and typically remains in that position for one year. The dissimilar positions of the Director and Assistant Director color how they interact with tutors. The Director, as a professor, is seen more as an authority figure while the Assistant Director is often perceived as a peer of the tutors. This means that tutors' relationships outside of the writing center with the Director and the Assistant Director are necessarily different. The Director will sometimes have tutors as students in the classroom, and, therefore, have both evaluative power over the students and a potentially closer relationship with them than with tutors only known through the Writing Center. This is possibly a significant dynamic, as the manner in which the Director responds to particular tutors was cited as important in the formation of hierarchies. Conversely, when tutors have relationships with the Assistant Director outside of the Writing Center, it is typically as friends, where neither party holds particular power over the other.

The differences inherent in these relationships could be important in how a writing center is run, as they often affect the manner in which tutors communicate with those who run the center. For example, the same information from tutors may be conveyed differently to each person, or some tutors may only feel comfortable sharing concerns or information with one of the two. Furthermore, perceptions of these relationships between tutors and directors/as-

sistant directors may affect relationships among the tutors. For example, a perception similar to that of a “teacher’s pet” could develop regarding tutors who have closer relationships with a director. These differing relationships affect communication in our Writing Center, but centers organized in other ways may also benefit from looking at factors that affect communication in their centers. Furthermore, these modes of communication may also affect how tutors perceive each other in the context of a writing center.

### Renouncing Authority

Being a tutor in a writing center can be quite a demanding position; tutoring requires much more than simply having the ability to proofread. It calls for patience, interest, effort, and cooperation, to name a few characteristics. However, what if a tutor has all of these qualities except for when it comes to being a part of the tutoring faculty? Does this impair a writing center’s ability to function? A tutor’s workload may be one of these impairing factors. During busier times, around midterms and finals, a tutor can easily become stressed by his/her own workload, and finding the time to get everything done can be difficult. So, it is understandable that one may feel overwhelmed when trying to also help peers with their work. However, there are also times when tutors are just not interested in their work as a tutor, and their efforts may subside. A potential problem could be seeing tutors who, in order to avoid having to work with tutees, will keep their heads lowered or pretend to not see the tutees until someone else steps up and offers to work with them. Another hypothetical issue could arise from tutors pulling the “not it” card, by which a tutor refuses to work with a tutee by calling out “not it.” Both incidents are unfair to the other tutors and may even leave them in a bind; if they have been tutoring non-stop, inattention by the “not it” tutors does not allow for the other tutors to even have a breather. This type of laxity can lead to frayed relationships between the tutors and cause a writing center to run less smoothly. Not to mention that portraying this kind of manner gives a negative impression to the tutees. Therefore, looking into such issues may benefit the writing center community.

### Respecting Authority

For the most part, when a student comes to a writing center seeking help for a paper, he/she will work one-to-one with a tutor. Even so, sometimes he/she will pose a question that is not so easily answered and may not be found in a reference book. Therefore, we may need some assistance from our fellow tutors. At times though, we may unintentionally cross boundaries and step on other tutors’ toes in the process. One of the ways in which this may happen is by interrupting during tutoring sessions. While it is always nice to get a second opinion, it is not the best when you never asked for it in the first place. Overhearing a tutoring session does not give someone the freedom to interpose and chances are that doing so will only get on the tutor’s nerves, especially if he/she is made to look bad by the interrupting tutor. Plus, crossing such boundaries and undermining the tutor may persuade the tutee to lose confidence in their tutoring session. This is not to say that offering advice is not welcomed, just that there are better ways to do so than by interfering. Another issue that may arise lies within subsequent tutoring sessions. For example, one tutor may work with a student, make some suggestions, and tell the student to come back later. When the student does come back, a separate tutor works with the student but either does not understand what the first tutor asked the tutee to do or does not feel that the first tutor made appropriate suggestions. That being said, the second tutor still needs to help the tutee, but at the same time, does not want to undermine the first tutor’s authority. In order to respect one another’s authority, we must respect the boundaries that are laid out. However, it is important to note that giving advice is not a bad thing. If someone is seen struggling in a tutoring session, by all means, give them a hand. Discussing this important aspect could help mend frayed relationships between tutors and, of course, help a writing center to function.

### Conclusion

We hope that the issues we have encountered in our Writing Center can be a starting point for conversations about similar issues present in other writing centers. Though the subjects discussed in this article are certainly not universal, we feel that they may be indicative of themes present in other writing centers. We feel that by addressing the negotiation of authority between tutors, we can enhance relationships between tutors and promote professionalism in the writing center. Awareness of these issues will, in turn, improve how the writing center functions. When tutors can work together in an environment of respect, they will be able to advise each other, which will enhance the quality of tutoring and allow a writing center to run more smoothly. ♦

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# CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

**Oct. 4, 2008:** Michigan Writing Centers Association, in Livonia, MI

**Contact:** Ann Russell; arussel@madonna.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://www.miwritingcenters.org/>>.



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

**Contact:** Claire Hughes: clairehughes@weber.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://departments.weber.edu/writingcenter/TWCA.htm>>.



**March 27-28, 2009:** Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in York, PA

**Contact:** Cynthia Crimmins (crimmin@ycp.edu) or Dominic Delli Carpini (dcarpini@ycp.edu). Conference Web site: <[www.ycp.edu/lrc/maw-ca2009](http://www.ycp.edu/lrc/maw-ca2009)>.



**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).



**April 4-5, 2009:** New England Writing Centers Association, in Hartford, CT

**Contact:** Katherine Tirabassi; 603-358-2924; e-mail: ktirabassi@keene.edu



**April 17-18, 2009:** Pacific Northwest Writing Centers Association, in Ellensburg, WA

**Contact:** Teresa Joy Kramer, kramert@cwu7.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://www.pnwca.org>>.



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