

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E W T T E R

Volume 33, Number 9

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

May, 2009

## – FROM THE EDITOR –

The articles in this month's issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* are a mix of quantitative research and what Donald Schön termed "reflective practice inquiry." Both forms of research offer important conclusions about what we do. Roberta Henson and Sharon Stephenson's quantitative research was conducted for institutional assessment purposes and has the heartening conclusion that indicates definite areas of improvement in essays by writers who had come for tutorials. Doug Enders' longitudinal study was done to learn more about what tutors and students talk about in their sessions.

Susan Meyers' article offers conclusions about her identity as a writer, based on reflecting on her experience as a non-native speaker in another country. Her insights have allowed her to understand more about what students from other cultures and languages are experiencing when she meets them in writing tutorials. And Conan Griffin also reflects on his own experience as a writer to help him understand how he can relate more effectively to the writers he meets.

After the June issue, we pause for the summer and resume next September. If there are writing-center related job announcements or conference calls that you want in the June issue, please send them to me (harrism@purdue.edu) by mid-May so that they can be included.

For all of us who are "Up Over," happy spring; and for our readers "Down Under," happy autumn and encroaching winter.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

## INSIDE

### *Writing Consultations Can Effect Quantifiable Change: One Institution's Assessment*

◆ Roberta Henson and Sharon Stephenson ◆

Page 1

### *What We Talk About: A Longitudinal Study of Writing Tasks Students and Writing Center Tutors Discuss*

◆ Doug Enders ◆

Page 6

### *Pura Vida: What My Life in Costa Rica Taught Me about Teaching English as a Second Language*

◆ Susan Meyers ◆

Page 11

### *Tutor's Column: "A Comma-fused Past: Relating to the Mistakes of Tutees"*

◆ Conan M. Griffin ◆

Page 14

### *Calendar for Writing Center Associations*

Page 16

## WRITING CONSULTATIONS CAN EFFECT QUANTIFIABLE CHANGE: ONE INSTITUTION'S ASSESSMENT

◆ Roberta Henson and Sharon Stephenson  
Indiana Wesleyan University  
Marion, Indiana

As Indiana Wesleyan University began preparing for its ten-year accreditation visit, I met with the Director of Assessment to discuss the types of data we were keeping on the Writing Center. I proudly showed her the extensive Excel file of data reflecting our Writing Center's growth since its inception in 1996. She replied that my data were fine, but if I wanted to "prove" that the Writing Center helped students become better writers, I needed to create a "quantifiable study that statistically measures the improvements in students' writing, perhaps comparing clients' and non-clients' first and last drafts."

Of course, that's what every writing center director hopes for, but we all know how difficult it is to "count beans" in the writing center and "make the beans count" (Lerner, "Counting Beans"). In his article, "The Relationship between Writing Centers and Improvement in Writing Ability: An Assessment of the Literature," Casey Jones laments that, "Missing from this roster [of writing center assessments] is the type of 'formal' research common to physical and social sciences, and most notably absent are evaluation studies utilizing quantitative methodologies" (6). He includes in his assessment James Bennett's attempt to measure the influence of writing center visits on student essays by comparing pre/post essay scores (the very thing

*continued on page 2*

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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.

our Director of Assessment recommended we do) with “inconclusive results” (9-10). Jones goes on to claim that he has “not unearthed a single ‘hard’ empirical study of writing center instructional efficacy published since the late 1980’s” (10). Jones concludes that the difficulties of conducting empirical research in composition studies has led researchers to center their studies around anecdotal evidence and qualitative reflections on student writing practices, studies that are, in Neal Lerner’s words, “naturalistic” and provide “rich and nuanced” perspectives on our fields (“Writing Center Assessment” 58). Consequently, I was hesitant to consider, let alone attempt, an empirical study.

In spite of the research, we began engaging in the “what if” game. What if we could somehow randomly get half the students in a composition class to visit the Writing Center and use the other half as a control group? What if we could collect first and last drafts of all the students in the class and measure the improvements, comparing the Writing Center clients with the non-clients? After we considered several possibilities and problems, our “what if’s” evolved into a study that we hoped would help answer the calls being made for quantitative studies in the writing center field, as well as help validate the work of our Writing Center.

We hoped our research would show a statistically significant improvement in Writing Center clients’ final drafts as compared to non-clients’ and thus suggest that writing consultations can help students become better writers. However, because quantitative studies of this sort typically provide inconclusive results, we decided to include multiple components, hoping that if we fell short of reaching our primary goal, perhaps at least one component of the study would provide valuable insight into the efficacy of our Writing Center. In the end, although much of our data proved inconclusive, we did achieve our initial goal: our research revealed a statistically significant improvement between our clients’ first and final drafts when compared with non-clients’, suggesting that Writing Center visits were instrumental in effecting improvement in several aspects of our students’ writing.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

We based the research design on advice given by Cindy Johaneck and Lerner that researchers use both quantitative and qualitative measures, triangulating a variety of methods in order—as Lerner describes it—to gain a “rich and nuanced perspective to our evaluation studies” and to obtain “statistical evidence [which] lends itself to short forms, perfect for bullet items, Power Point presentations, and short attention spans—perfect for appeals to administrators and accrediting bodies” (“Writing Center Assessment” 59). With this advice in mind, we developed the following research questions:

- Do Writing Center visits effect a quantifiable improvement in clients’ writing?
- What specific qualities of writing might reflect improvement as a result of a writing consultation?
- Does a Writing Center intervention decrease our clients’ writing anxiety?
- Are certain personalities more likely than others to visit the Writing Center voluntarily?
- How do our clients perceive the help they receive from the Writing Center?

Our study focused on two classes—one section of English Composition and one section of Advanced Writing. Students in those classes were given a choice of whether or not to make use of the Writing Center, and approximately half of them did. The research questions led us to collect several types of data from the two classes. To answer the first question, we collected the first and final drafts of two (out of four) portfolio essays, choosing an essay written early in the semester and one written later in the semester. We theorized that looking at essays produced early and late in the semester would provide a more accurate picture of students’ writing, and thus a more accurate assessment of improvements between first and final drafts.

In order to provide clear criteria for evaluating the essays, we developed a rubric. Although it contained some of the same criteria as the rubrics used for grading in the courses, we chose to measure the elements with which tutors helped students the most, from large-order to small-order concerns: the introduction, conclusion, content development, organization, paragraph unity and coherence, diction, and grammar/mechanics.

The students in the two classes were also asked to complete pre-semester and post-semester Daly-Miller tests to assess whether Writing Center visits helped alleviate clients' writing anxiety, and they were asked to take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to reveal whether certain personality types seemed more likely than others to visit the Writing Center voluntarily. Finally, once the semester was over, we conducted online interviews to discover how students who visited the Writing Center perceived the help they received, how their perceptions might correspond to the other data, and why other students chose not to visit the Writing Center.

Once we had obtained IRB approval, we established several controls before beginning the study—our goal being to make the Writing Center intervention the only variable for students in the two classes. First, to assure as much as possible that instruction remained consistent for both classes, one of us taught the English Composition class, and the other taught the Advanced Writing class; we maintained similar teaching styles, using multiple drafts and portfolio assessments. In addition, our courses had similar aims—to develop our students' abilities to write within the academy. To control our own biases, we did not know which students were volunteering to visit the Writing Center until after the study. Last, since we as the instructors would recognize our own students' essays, we did not assess our own students' essays for this study.

## THE POPULATION

The population was comprised of one section of English Composition and one section of Advanced Writing. We reasoned that this would provide a fairly diverse cross section of the campus population. Twenty-five English Composition students and 26 Advanced Writing students participated, for a total of 51 students in the study. The English Composition class was made up of 20 freshmen, 1 sophomore, 4 juniors, and 0 seniors, while the Advanced Writing class contained 1 freshman, 5 sophomores, 5 juniors, and 15 seniors for a total of 21 freshmen, 6 sophomores, 9 juniors, and 15 seniors—a reasonably even balance of freshmen and seniors and a fair representation of our Writing Center's clientele.

When the study ended, we discovered which students had visited the Writing Center. Of the 25 English Composition students, 13 students volunteered to visit the Writing Center and 12 did not, while 10 of the 26 Advanced Writing students volunteered and 16 did not. This gave us an experimental group totaling 23 and a control group totaling 28 students.

## DATA

In the first week of the semester we simply asked for volunteers from our classes to take their essays to the Writing Center. We explained that we were doing a study of the Writing Center's efficacy and that to prevent bias in favor of those participating, we would not know which of them were volunteering. We each received the other's students' Writing Center Report forms, which enabled us to know that a portion of the students were volunteering.<sup>1</sup>

*“ [T]he Writing Center did have a positive impact on its clients, effecting quantifiable improvement in certain elements of their essays. ”*

# NEWS

## WRITING SKILLS COORDINATOR, CENTER FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCES ST. JOSEPH COLLEGE

Saint Joseph College seeks an individual to provide services to students and faculty to help students develop writing skills that are essential at the College and after graduation. This is a 10-month (academic year) position. The successful candidate will have a master's degree and background in specific disciplines to provide tutorial assistance in those areas; coursework beyond a master's degree is desirable; proven track record as a teacher and tutor in areas of expertise is required; excellent oral, written, communication, interpersonal, organizational, computer, and problem solving skills are essential; proven track record of integrating computer technology into the learning process is essential.

Please send resume to  
Assistant Director, Academic Resources  
Center Search c/o Human Resources  
Saint Joseph College  
1678 Asylum Avenue  
West Hartford, CT 06117  
or e-mail: [hr@sjc.edu](mailto:hr@sjc.edu).  
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For a full position description please visit the Employment (Staff) section of our website, <<http://www.sjc.edu/jobs>>.

We next supplied our students with an online link to the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test and asked them to complete it as a pre-test. Finally, we obtained MBTI scores from the students who had taken the MBTI and provided a link for those who hadn't, so they could complete the test online through our Life Calling and Leadership Department. After the initial preparation for the study, classes were conducted routinely during the semester.

At the end of the semester, we asked our students to take the Daly-Miller once again as a post-test. We also collected clean copies of first and last drafts of the essays, deleted the names on them, and assigned numbers to each draft, mixing first and last drafts together to prevent the raters from knowing which draft they were reading. When the semester was over, four fellow composition instructors joined us to rate the essays. To ensure rating consistency, we provided an explanation sheet that described the qualities an essay should possess for each criteria. We discussed each component of the rubric, which allowed the raters to assess each quality on a scale of 0-6. The group then evaluated a common essay and discussed the similarities and differences in our assessment until we reached consensus. Once we were in sync concerning the rubric, we assessed the essays, with each essay being read by two readers.<sup>2</sup> Once the essays had been assessed, we added the numbers for each criterion on the first and last drafts. We then collated the information and sent it to our statistician, who ran a T-test analysis. We also assessed the Daly-Miller pre/post scores and the MBTI scores, and conducted online interviews with the students.

### THE RESULTS

The results of our study were mixed where most of the data were concerned. Unfortunately, several students neglected to complete the Daly-Miller, turn in MBTI scores, or return the online questionnaire, making those portions of our data incomplete and preventing us from drawing helpful conclusions about three of the research questions.

However, we did collect enough data to answer the first and second questions—which was our initial goal—to determine if there was significant improvement between first and last drafts in several elements of the Writing Center clients' essays when compared to non-clients'. We found that Writing Center clients from the English Composition course experienced a statistically significant ( $P < .05$ ) increase in clarity of purpose in the introductions of their essays in comparison to the non-volunteers in that class. In the Advanced Writing class, clients experienced a statistically significant ( $P < .05$ ) increase in precision of thesis as compared to non-clients. In addition, when the data for the English Composition and Advanced Writing classes were combined, the T-test indicated a statistically significant ( $P < .05$ ) increase in Writing Center clients' precision of thesis, use of examples, use of sensory details, paragraph unity, and overall improvement in essay quality as compared to non-clients. These results imply that writing center consultations can effect improvements in many qualities of our clients' essays.

### CONCLUSION:

Despite the positive results, several caveats exist. First, though students were randomly placed into their classes, they self-selected whether to visit the Writing Center. Thus, it's possible that those who volunteered were more motivated than the control group and would have made significant revision without a writing consultation. Clearly, students who care about their work will take more time with revision and are more apt to spend time participating in a writing consultation, so these students may have improved their final drafts more than the control group regardless of the writing consultation.

Another possible explanation for the improvements between first and last drafts is that students' quality of writing varies from essay to essay. Thus it's possible that the improvements we measured may have



resulted from this variation rather than from the Writing Center visit. Another factor was that some students visited the Writing Center only once while others visited several times. This inconsistency in number of visits may have skewed the results to some degree, also making it difficult to determine whether improvements were to single essays or to the clients' overall writing abilities.

Since our goal was to measure whether Writing Center visits helped improve the writers' overall writing skills, we deliberately opted to collect essays without regard to whether the writers had taken these specific essays to the Writing Center. We theorized that if students became better writers, those improved writing skills would be reflected in all their essays. Therefore, measured improvements in any of their essays could imply an improvement in their overall writing skills. On the other hand, it seems possible that a few, if not more, of the essays we assessed did go to the Writing Center. If this is the case, the consultations may have directly impacted them for the better. This improvement in itself is a positive result, but it doesn't answer our question: Do Writing Center sessions help improve our clients' overall writing abilities? It simply tells us that the writing consultation may have helped produce a better essay.

Though we keep in mind these potential influences on the results, we are heartened that the primary difference between the volunteers' and non-volunteers' writing class experience seems to be the Writing Center visit; this implies that the Writing Center did have a positive impact on its clients, effecting quantifiable improvement in certain elements of their essays. In addition, we now have an assessment that would seem to help with "appeals to administrators and accrediting bodies," which we will soon find ourselves facing (Lerner, "Writing Center Assessment" 59). Finally, we have produced a rudimentary study that other schools and writing center administrators might model or build on for their own assessment reports. ♦

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> We reasoned that if not enough students volunteered, we could strongly encourage more of them to visit the Writing Center. Since the typical Writing Center population is comprised of both self-motivated and instructor-motivated students, doing so wouldn't adversely affect the study.

<sup>2</sup> We planned to have a third reader in the case of large discrepancies—fortunately, we did not encounter any large discrepancies.



### WRITING CENTER COORDINATOR LINDSEY WILSON COLLEGE

Lindsey Wilson College, in Columbia, KY, is seeking a Writing Center Coordinator and instructor of English to oversee the daily management of a full-service writing center beginning August 1, 2009. Responsibilities include supervising tutors, coordinating Writing Center activities, responding to faculty instructional needs, organizing workshops, and maintaining data on Writing Center use. In addition to administrative work, the position also includes a four-course teaching load annually. This is a 10-month position.

M.A. in relevant area required, though Ph.D. and ABD candidates are encouraged to apply. Review of applications will begin immediately and continue until the position is filled. Applicants must send a letter of interest, CV with the names of three references, and a statement of philosophy detailing how the applicant thinks a writing center should function theoretically and practically.

Please submit application materials by mail or e-mail to

Dr. Bettie C. Starr, Vice President for  
Academic Affairs  
Lindsey Wilson College  
210 Lindsey Wilson St.  
Columbia, Kentucky 42728

Electronic submission of materials to [starb@lindsey.edu](mailto:starb@lindsey.edu) is preferred.

LWC is an EOE.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### A NING IS BORN!

*Jennifer Wells  
Mercy High School  
Burlingame, CA*

A new online resource for middle and high school writing centers, and the people who love them, has been created: a Ning! <<http://writingcenters.ning.com/>>.

#### *What is a Ning?*

A Ning is a social network, an online place for people to have discussions, write blogs, upload photos and video, and make new connections, but unlike more famous social networks like Facebook or MySpace, a Ning can be walled off, so that only members of a particular community have access to that community.

#### *How is the Ning different than the listserv?*

Listservs are great for sharing timely news, announcements, and relevant conversations. However, no one wants to bombard a listserv with photos or musings on the day-to-day things that happen in our writing centers, yet these are what make our writing centers so interesting and important. The Ning provides the space for that to happen, and complete control for members to choose when they want to visit the site. If the listserv is like a conference, the Ning is the conversation that happens in the hallways and elevators and restaurants outside the conference.

#### *How can I use the Ning?*

Like any social network, the Ning will be as interesting and useful as members make it. On the Ning, members can blog about their centers, upload photos of their centers, ask those burning questions, and more. Current discussions include "Getting Students Into Your Center," and one intriguing blog post ruminates on middle/high school writing center evaluation.

#### *How can I join the Ning?*

Go to <<http://writingcenters.ning.com/>> and create a user name and password. Members can control the notifications they wish to receive by choosing to "follow" specific discussions/blogs/introductions, or not.

## WHAT WE TALK ABOUT: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF WRITING TASKS STUDENTS AND WRITING CENTER TUTORS DISCUSS

◆*Doug Enders  
Shenandoah University  
Winchester, Virginia*

We who work in writing centers know that students who visit our centers talk extensively with tutors about writing and learn to communicate their ideas more clearly through this dialogue. Not surprisingly, we have studied this talk extensively, examining in particular its collaborative qualities and benefits. (See Gere and Abbot; Davis, Hayward, Hunter, and Wallace; Wolcott; Severino; and Blau, Hall, and Strauss.) While this research has helped us to understand *how* tutors and students interact and what kinds of language characterize their conversations, little has been published identifying the variety and frequency of writing tasks—from understanding assignments to developing ideas to editing mechanics—that tutors and students actually discuss. Such information, if made available, could help us determine more accurately what takes place in writing center tutorials, which in turn could help us better assess our services.

Like other writing center directors, I had a general sense of the kinds of writing tasks being addressed in tutorials, but without a statistical record, I didn't know the proportion of each. Was editing really the focus for most students and tutors, or were other writing tasks given more attention? How often did students and tutors talk about editing? How often did they talk about organization, idea development, or documentation? Could I find trends in the tasks and identify their causes? Ultimately, I wanted to know what kinds of writing tasks were being discussed (and performed) in the Center and how these tasks might vary among students from different disciplines, at different course levels, and in different class years.

To find some of the answers, I performed a four-year quantitative study of over 3,200 tutorials at the North Carolina Wesleyan Writing Center. I asked tutors to identify the kinds of writing tasks discussed in their sessions; I then quantified the ways in which those tasks varied by discipline, course level, and student year. The study and its findings, reported here, presented me with a new window into tutoring sessions. The study also offers the writing center community at large a useful model for assessing the degree to which our centers are more than the editing shops they are sometimes accused of being.

### TRACKING

To track tutorial discussions, I devised a list of tasks that tutors described as having taken place in their tutorials. Tutors then identified these tasks in their tutor reports. One tutorial could address between zero and ten of the following tasks:

- Understanding the assignment/format
- Establishing a purpose
- Developing or clarifying a thesis
- Establishing a proper focus
- Developing ideas
- Organizing ideas
- Documenting/researching
- Editing ideas and language
- Editing mechanics
- Other

Entering the writing tasks along with basic student information in an Excel database allowed me to calculate the total number of these tasks and to determine the percentage of visits in which they occurred according to a visitor's year in college, major, division, course-level, and (eventually) course.

Initially, student information was stored on two separate Excel databases—one that tracked number of visits by student, major, and division, and another that tracked the writing tasks in each visit. Although this setup recorded the information I needed, it prevented me from identifying the tasks student visitors performed by course. Realizing a missed opportunity, I eventually merged the databases and added the variable of course name. Thus, whereas I have identified the total number and percentage of instances in which a writing task was performed according to student year, major, and division in more than 3,200 tutorials over a four-year period, I have tracked these figures at the course level from 2003 to 2005 only.

## INFLUENCES AND LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Several institutional factors influenced the outcomes of this study. First, the study occurred in the initial four years of our Writing Center's existence when a writing center culture had to be developed on campus to educate students, faculty, and administration of its mission and presence. During these years, many viewed the Writing Center as a place to fix papers. If I had conducted my study ten years after the center had been firmly established, the results might have looked quite different.

A second factor was tutor training that emphasized a non-directive approach to tutoring and placed concern for global issues above surface-level ones. This emphasis not only affected the topics of conversation between students and tutors but also shaped the way tutors reported their conversations, since they were writing reports for an audience who had trained them. In tutor training, I distinguished between "editing ideas and language" and "editing mechanics," noting that the first phrase referred to helping a student clarify ideas and language, often in cutting wordiness or refining vocabulary, while the second referred to issues of spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Despite my efforts to make this distinction clear to tutors, some confusion between the two lingered, as illustrated by repeated discussions of the topic each year.

A third factor influencing the outcomes was tutor turnover. Over four years, thirteen tutors worked in the center: eight full-time undergraduates and five non-students who taught English part-time at the college. While all tutors participated in the same basic training, each brought distinctive personalities, biases, and levels of writing experience to tutoring that no doubt influenced their conversations. Some were comfortable with non-directive tutoring, others weren't. Some enjoyed tutoring for the experience of exploring ideas and language, while others fought the temptation to clean up mistake-ridden prose. Tutor training helped to balance these peeves and preferences to some extent, as did our policy preventing tutors who taught from working with students from their own classes. Since the study relied on tutor-generated reports, its accuracy might have been influenced by tutors' biases and their awareness that the director was invested in validating a new writing center. Future researchers would do well to draw from both student- and tutor-generated reports or even some third-party means to address the question of reporting reliability.

Another limitation of the study is that, while it measured the frequency in which writing tasks were addressed in tutorials, it did not quantify time spent on those tasks. Having done so, the study could have presented a clearer picture of tutorial focus.

## GENERAL FINDINGS 2001-2005

Tracking total student visits from fall 2001 through summer 2005 reveals that the writing tasks most frequently discussed with tutors involved editing of some kind. In 49.4% of all tutorials, students worked on "editing mechanics" and in 38.2%, students addressed "editing ideas and language." These tasks were followed closely in frequency by "developing ideas" (38%) and "organizing ideas" (34.7%) and, in turn, by "documenting/research" (29.6%), "developing or clarifying a thesis" (24.3%), and "under-

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### ONLINE MLA TUTORIAL

"MLA for Students: A No-Nerves Guide to MLA Style" is a multimedia online tutorial that aims at helping first-year students understand how to format their papers and source documentation in MLA style. "MLA for Students" engages its audience with a conversational voice and a creative approach to a straightforward topic. The tutorial includes several video screen captures that show students the necessary steps to formatting papers or finding important information. It also features a video of student voices, as well as audio narration, music, and animated examples. The tutorial was created by Jessica Arnold, Graduate Assistant Director of the Salisbury University Writing Center (UWC). It can be accessed via the UWC homepage: <[www.salisbury.edu/uwc](http://www.salisbury.edu/uwc)> by clicking on the link "MLA for Students" on the left navigation menu.

In light of its recent release, the UWC is interested in receiving feedback on the tutorial from writing center directors and tutors alike. We would like to hear feedback on the tutorial itself, as well as how you use or would like to use the tutorial within your consultations with students, your writing center, or your courses. Please send your feedback by e-mail to the SU Writing Center at [universitywritingcenter@](mailto:universitywritingcenter@)



**WRITING CENTER—  
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR  
U. OF NORTH CAROLINA-  
CHAPEL HILL**

This is a full-time, non-faculty position in an innovative, busy center providing on-site and online tutorial services to a broad range of students, faculty, and staff. The assistant director will collaborate with the director, ESL specialists, administrative assistant, and student writing consultants to create and deliver programs and services. Please visit The Writing Center's webpage <<http://www.unc.edu/writingcenter>> for more information.

*Education Requirements:* A master's degree in a related field is required; a Ph.D. is strongly preferred. Academic background in rhetoric and composition is preferred.

*Qualifications and Experience:* 3 or more years of writing center experience in a research-based college or university setting is strongly preferred; candidates with extensive experience tutoring in another college or university setting, such as a learning skills center, may be considered. Experience teaching writing is required. Administrative experience and technology skills are valued.

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  
Assistant Director Search Committee  
450 Ridge Road, Suite 2203  
SASB N., Campus, Box 3106  
UNC-CH  
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3106.

Teaching portfolios, examples of web design, or other materials that demonstrate relevant abilities are also welcomed.

EEO employer.

standing the assignment/format" (21.6%). "Establishing a proper focus" (17.8%), "establishing a purpose for the paper" (14.3%), and "other" (8.3%) rounded out the list.

At first glance, these numbers seem to support a view that sees the writing center as similar to an editing shop. Nearly half of the tutorials addressed editing issues, a surprisingly high figure, and this focus on editing cannot be ascribed to second language speakers because ESL students comprised less than 2% of the college's student population, and few of them visited our Center. Ultimately, many native English speakers sought help from the Writing Center in cleaning up surface-level problems in their papers.

Is this finding a cause for concern? I think not, for two reasons. First, students who were involved in "editing mechanics" and "editing ideas and language" were not simply dropping off papers to be corrected; instead, they were learning how to edit those papers under the guidance of a tutor, which is a justifiable activity.

Second, while this study's findings fail to establish how much time was generally devoted to editing in tutorials—a subject for future research, they do put into perspective the frequency in which editing was addressed in relation to other writing tasks:

- In 38% of student visits, "editing ideas and language" and "editing mechanics" never occurred
- Students who worked on "editing ideas and language" also attended, on average, to 2.0 non-editing tasks
- Students who worked on "editing mechanics" also addressed, on average, 2.9 non-editing tasks

While editing was a concern addressed in nearly 50% of Writing Center visits, students on average tackled at least two other issues in those sessions. Moreover, nearly 40% of all visits involved no editing of any kind, and only 23% of visits focused solely on editing. To me at least, these figures suggest that our Center was more than an editing shop, as editing was just one of many concerns that students sought help with.

### FINDINGS BY DIVISION 2001-2005

Identifying students by division—Humanities, Education-Social Sciences, Business, and Math-Sciences—reveals several trends in the types of tasks they addressed with tutors. Consistent with the overall findings, students in every division addressed "editing mechanics" more frequently than any other task. But the percentages differed by division, ranging from a high in Business (64%) to a low in Education-Social Sciences (43%), with Humanities (49%) and Math-Science (48%) falling in between. Clearly, editing played a more prominent role in tutorials with business students than it did in tutorials with students from other divisions. The question was why.

It wasn't that business students were any worse or less experienced at writing than other students; in fact, most came from upper-level courses. However, the Business division at North Carolina Wesleyan, as such divisions at other schools, possessed an ethos stressing that all communiqués—memos, job applications, reports, etc.—must be free of grammatical and mechanical errors to be effective. Thus, from 2001 through 2005, one business instructor required all students to get their papers "proofread by a tutor," and he refused to grade any paper without a Writing Center notice confirming a visit. The students complied, and so not surprisingly Business led the other divisions in the percentage of visits addressing "editing language and ideas" and "editing mechanics." To its credit, however, the Business division also led in the percentage of visits in three non-editing categories:



“documenting/researching,” “organizing ideas,” and “establishing a purpose for the paper.” So while editing was a dominant component—one mandated by faculty—it was not the only one important to business students.

Several other trends can be found by looking at writing tasks according to division. Visitors from the Math-Science division worked on understanding assignments at a significantly greater percentage than did students from other divisions. Math-science students discussed assignment expectations in 31% of their visits, while humanities, education-social science, and business students addressed assignments in 23%, 20%, and 18% of their visits, respectively. The noticeable gap between the math-science students and the others could be attributed to several causes. First, it is possible that math-science writing assignments were less clear than in other divisional courses; however, a high percentage of the math-science faculty discussed their assignments with Writing Center staff to ensure clarity. Second, math-science students may have had less experience writing in those classes in high school and so may not have felt prepared to deal with writing assignments in those subjects once in college. It may also be that the learning styles of these students differed from those of humanities students.

Another notable trend suggests that tutorials with students from humanities courses placed greater emphasis on addressing global writing tasks, such as “developing or clarifying a thesis,” “establishing a proper focus,” “establishing a purpose for the paper,” and “developing ideas,” than did tutorials with students from other divisions. This emphasis may reflect the kinds of papers humanities students are asked to write, the pedagogical focus of their professors, or both. Whereas business, education, and social science students often write research reports or case studies, humanities students typically must write papers in which they develop their own topics, formulate responses, or offer interpretations. As a result, when these students visited the Writing Center, they did a lot more than edit.

### FINDINGS BY COURSE LEVEL, 2003-2005

Examining the writing tasks addressed by students from different course levels points out several other trends. First, students from 100-level courses tackled global writing issues at a greater frequency than students from other course levels. The percentage of student visits addressing “understanding the assignment/format,” “developing or clarifying a thesis,” “establishing a proper focus,” “developing ideas,” and “organizing ideas” decreased as student course levels increased. While “understanding the assignment/format” and “organizing ideas” decreased less than 5%, “developing or clarifying a thesis,” “establishing a proper focus,” and “developing ideas” decreased at least 10% from 100- to 400-level courses. The clearest pattern of this decrease occurred in visits addressing “developing or clarifying a thesis,” which dropped from 37% in 100-level courses to 17% in 400-level courses and “establishing a proper focus,” which dropped from 29% to 18%.

A possible explanation for this first-year emphasis on global issues lies with Writing Center visitors from English 101, the course that generated most of the Center’s traffic. English 101 students generally discussed a higher percentage of all writing tasks than did students from other courses, addressing on average eight out of ten categories in at least 20% of all visits. Thus, it may not be true that students in upper-level courses weren’t concerned with global issues in their writing; they simply weren’t as focused on these issues as when they participated in formal writing courses, typically taken in their first year of college.

A predictable second trend demonstrates an opposite development. As their course level increased, Writing Center visitors generally worked more on documentation and research issues. Whereas only 28% of visits from students in 100-level courses contained discussion of documentation and research issues, 48% of visits from students in 400-level courses addressed these areas. Not surprisingly, 100-

## TAKE NOTE

### WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

July 16-19, 2009  
*“Discerning WPAs: Discourse/Diversity/Accountability”*  
 Minneapolis, MN

The conference starts with a three-day workshop, then a one-day Institute, and then a three-day conference.

July 12-15: The WPA Workshop, for new, prospective, and continuing administrators will be led by Chris Anson and Carol Rutz. The Workshop website is <<http://wpa2009.umn.edu/workshop/>>.

July 16: There will be two Institutes: The “Writing Program Administrators as Writers” Institute, to be led by Nancy Sommers; and the “Renewal Institute” to be led by Susanmarie Harrington, Doug Hesse, and Duane Roen. The Institutes website is <<http://wpa2009.umn.edu/institutes/>>.

July 16-19: Conference

The Conference Chair is Joseph Janangelo ([jjanang@luc.edu](mailto:jjanang@luc.edu)). For more information and registration, the conference website is <<http://wpa2009.umn.edu/>>.



2010 Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) Conference  
 July 15-18, 2010  
 Philadelphia, PA  
 (Workshop is July 11-14; Institutes will be July 15)

level courses, including English 101, place less emphasis on research writing than do upper-level courses.

A third trend suggests that students attended to “editing mechanics” more as their course-level increased, at least until the 400-level. Students from 100-level courses dealt with this task in 46% of their visits, while 200-, 300-, and 400-level students did so in 47%, 53%, and 39% of their visits, respectively. The interesting figure here occurred at the 300-level, where the high percentage was due in large part to the 300-level business instructor who required mandatory proofreading visits to the Writing Center. Because a significant proportion of 300-level student visitors to the Writing Center came from that class, and because 64% of those visits addressed “editing mechanics,” it appears that the overall 300-level percentage was skewed by the policy of a single professor. Nonetheless, if this professor’s students were pulled from the overall mix, the percentage of tutorials addressing “editing mechanics” still would have been 49%, slightly higher than 100- and 200-level figures.

The decline in the discussion of global issues suggests that students had less of a need in these areas, which in turn might imply that their skills had improved with college writing experience. Conversely, the fact that students were more likely to use the Center to address editing issues might suggest that they were being held to a higher standard in these areas in upper-level courses and so went to greater lengths to achieve them. Even though it is difficult to attribute the exact cause(s) of this decline to expectations of the discipline, professorial emphases, or student assumptions about using the Writing Center, collecting and sharing data on student use of the Writing Center can initiate conversation between the Writing Center, faculty, and students aimed at encouraging best use of the Center’s services.

## CONCLUSION

As a result of this four-year longitudinal study, I must acknowledge that editing was a prominent part of what we did in our Writing Center, though in part because of faculty expectation; however, it can certainly be said that we were much more than an editing shop, especially in serving students in lower-level courses like first-year composition. The study is important in that it validated our new center by providing data that gave me, the director, concrete knowledge of the kinds of work tutors and students addressed in their tutorials, knowledge that continues to hold profound implications for tutor training, public relations, and administrative reporting.

The study may also prove to be an important model and benchmark for others interested in writing center research and assessment. Although it considered over 3,200 tutorials, this study should only be the beginning of a larger conversation. A need for comparative research on the writing tasks addressed in other centers remains; a broader data set drawn from a variety of institutions and student-bodies would provide the academic community with an even clearer picture of student-tutor dialogue in the writing center.



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## PURA VIDA: WHAT MY LIFE IN COSTA RICA TAUGHT ME ABOUT TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Two and a half years ago, I did some of the worst writing of my life: I turned in essays with incomplete citations; I neglected to revise; and I relied on grammar check like it was my lifeblood. How, you may ask, can a teacher-researcher from a U.S. institution have become so negligent? The answer is, quite simply, that the context in which I wrote was not my own. During the academic year of 2004–2005, I took a series of graduate classes at the University of Costa Rica, where both the ethics and practice of writing were expressed differently than they are in the U.S. Of course, returning home, I slipped easily back into my old identity and habits; but that experience of having lived otherwise for a time continues to resonate. I still remember how, without my familiar orientation towards writing, I felt lost, unhinged, broken in half. I was a writer trying to learn how to write—and survive—in another country and academic system. Sound familiar? Yes, of course: this is exactly the challenge that most of our ESL writers face.

Stepping further back in time, more than twelve years ago, I was trained as an undergraduate writing consultant. As part of that training, I was taught several basic strategies for working with ESL students. My preparation was, I suspect, fairly traditional from the standpoint of writing center theory: look for patterns, consider student affect, do not overwhelm. In addition, I was offered a summary of Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric as a theoretical basis for these techniques: different cultures employ different patterns of linguistic expression, so we must help students recognize the difference between their patterns and ours. Therefore, I learned that I should be attuned to both errors and attitudes—the pitfalls of linguistic acquisition and the power of cultural patterns of expression. The latter idea fascinated me. *How could it be that varying cultural values shape the rhythms of thought and language? What kind of unspoken assumptions might be affecting the ways that my students write?* These questions eventually drove me to study abroad myself—with the hopes that I might finally understand the phenomena that these students experience. But the lessons I learned, far from tracing out neat graphical representations of thought, opened far more questions for me than they answered.

The general concept of guiding patterns of thought based on cultural values can be a helpful reminder of the very subjective nature of writing. For peer tutors and entry-level graduate students, this theory can be an excellent place to begin considering the wide array of writing models that exist—and, therefore, the true complexity of the work in which we are engaged as writing tutors.<sup>1</sup> However, the theory has been rightly criticized for being overly essentialist. How can we identify a pattern of exposition and categorize an entire culture accordingly? We cannot. The individual agency of each particular writer within that same context resists such sweeping strokes. Therefore, what I believe that we need to remember when working with ESL students is that a theory like contrastive rhetoric is simply a beginning point; it is by no means the end of the conversation. Moreover, this conversation, as scholars like Ulla Connor remind us, is changing. Rather than relying on strict linguistic frameworks, recent research in contrastive rhetoric now considers sociocultural variables, such as the ways in which different cultures create relationships between readers and writers (202). For instance, Connor explains that Japanese writing places responsibility on the reader, who must draw his or her own conclusions from a given text; however, the much more explicit writing style in the United States places more responsibility on the writer to clearly communicate his or her point (203).

Comparisons like these are helpful, I believe, because they emphasize the very interactive nature of writing. Even so, I do not find them sufficient in themselves. While it can be useful to highlight cultural patterns—linguistic or social—it is still important to test individual experiences against them. Moreover, instead of adopting such patterns wholesale, we should, more importantly, consider the aspects of culture that underlie both language and rhetoric: attitudes, values, and the reasons *why* certain rhetorical patterns get formed and practiced. It is my belief, having spent a decade working with these issues, that we cannot serve our students to the best of our ability until we begin to rely less on patterns and more on questions. By way of example, I would like to turn back to my own confusing experiences as an international student. What made things so difficult for me in Costa Rica? Well, one issue was that the writing that I was doing and being asked to do threw into question my identity *as a writer*. Indeed, issues of student identity and voice have often been cited as important issues to consider with international students. In some cases, for instance, ESL students arrive at U.S. institutions without any experience identifying themselves as independent, empowered writers. Such students often come to us from areas of the world where writing is not taught as its own discipline (Petric 12). These students are likely to need

both more time to adjust and more explanation about the relative merits of taking ownership of written texts. However, in other cases, some students—particularly those at the graduate level—have already developed a sense of themselves as writers in their home institutions. Arriving in the United States, they must revise and reconstruct a new writing identity based on the demands within this particular context (Hivela and Belcher 84).

My own situation matches this latter description. As an established student writer in my own context, I felt confident signing on for graduate work in another country. Moreover, I *liked* writing—both as a practitioner and a tutor—and I held a particular set of values about writing. First, I believed that connection among writer/message/audience is an important feature of writing and that it is crucial to a writer's motivation. Second, I believed that a writer's identity is important, as writing itself is a form of self-expression. Third, I believed in the idea of writing as a process; I believed that good writing is the end result of prewriting, feedback, and revision. However, the writing practices that I encountered in Costa Rica were not highly rhetorical, expressive, or recursive. Rather, the written projects assigned for my classes were treated in a procedural manner: assignments were collected, graded, and kept in the professors' files. Rarely was this work returned to us, and even more rare were qualitative evaluative comments. The discrepancy between the way that writing was treated in this context and the way that I thought it *should* be treated threw my identity as a writer into question: suddenly all of my successes with writing, and all of the pedagogical gemstones that I'd been taught about idea development and ownership, didn't seem to matter. As a result, I felt my motivation slacken; I began to write quickly and mechanically. I didn't identify with the writing I was doing; I just got it done. In this way, I learned how easy it is—even for good, dedicated writers—to lose both motivation and follow-through when they feel disconnected from or uncertain of the context in which they are writing.

Ironically, many aspects of academic activity looked the same in Costa Rica as they did at home: graduate classes were run as seminars; oral and written projects were assigned; examinations were held. On the surface, the differences between classes in the U.S. and Costa Rica did not seem very significant. Instead, what troubled me were the countless daily assumptions about what writing was for, or how it should be done, that were not explained to me. That is, it was not the explicit rules that were the problem; it was the implicit ones. For instance, as time passed, I began to notice that verbal interaction often trumped written authority. That is, my peers tended to rely more on dialogue than on written guidelines, negotiating first among themselves and then with the professor in order to change deadlines or assignment parameters. For example, if a holiday fell right before a paper due date, the students might agree that, because they would each be spending the holiday with their families, it would be more reasonable to extend the deadline so that their time with their families would not be interrupted.

Similar experiences throughout my year abroad reminded me again and again of the ways my own writing paradigm differed from that of Costa Rica. For instance, I once questioned my friend Raul about the numerous photocopy centers that I had noticed around campus. These copy centers were incredibly cheap, and it was possible to copy an entire book (what the students called “cloning”) for the equivalent of three or four dollars. Moreover, from what I was seeing, most students tended to borrow books from the library and have them cloned rather than buying new textbooks. “But isn't that a problem?” I asked Raul. “I mean, how will writers stay motivated to write books? They're not making any money off of them.” Raul looked at me curiously for a moment; clearly, he had no idea what troubled me. “Well,” he said finally, “People read their books; that's all the reward they need.” I nodded loosely, following him up the steps to the library, amazed once again at the implications of these subtle differences. Whereas in the U.S. we create academic honor codes and federal laws to protect intellectual property, Costa Ricans see no need to protect written words, published or otherwise. Later on, when I noticed my classmates lifting quotations or leaving citations incomplete in their papers, I knew these were not offenses that would be punished; it simply was not that big of a deal. As Raul had explained, the important thing is that the words got used. As a result, throughout my time in Costa Rica, I had to adjust my expectations of school procedures in many ways, not the least of which was the treatment of writing. It would have been easy to consider my professors lazy for not returning papers or the classes disorganized when deadlines and expectations shifted throughout the semester. However, the more time I spent there, the more I was able to contextualize educational practices in the broader spectrum of cultural norms. For instance, when Costa Ricans greet each other or give farewells, they use a common phrase, “Pura Vida,” to set the tone of their interactions. Translated literally as “pure life,” the expression is one of both politeness and deference. Costa Ricans remind themselves daily that they are just living, just being. If certain things come to pass, then they were so fated; if not, well then, it just was not in the cards. In this light, missed assignments and late classes took on new meaning. In this way, I came to recognize the intricate social workings based on verbal interplay and a guiding spirit of forgiveness for things that do not go according to plan.

Based on these experiences, I have improved my writing center practice in some important ways. To begin with, the lived experience of having found my writing identity challenged by a contrasting set of cultural values has made me more sympathetic to the students I tutor. Further, although I still make no claim to fully understand Costa Rican culture—let alone all of Latin America—I have gained a few insights that strengthened my general approach to students with backgrounds from this part of the world. One important lesson has been that of

the treatment of controversial topics. As other international scholarship has shown, many areas of the world do not treat political topics in writing classrooms, whether because they are dangerous or simply considered impolite (Muchiri 357).

Although Costa Rica is not as apolitical as some areas of the world, I found its culture to be notoriously conflict-averse. Costa Ricans are not very apt to open up and express opinions; they are more inclined to give the answers that they think people want to hear. A common example of this pattern is Costa Ricans' tendency to give faulty directions. Rather than be impolite by admitting that they do not know the way to arrive at a given location, Costa Ricans infamously invent an answer, sending travelers, like me, down a long goose chase of winding, unmarked streets. The intention, however, is not malicious; it is simply a means of maintaining social decorum. So, too, may be the case with a student from Costa Rica who resists stating a strong opinion in an academic paper or offers an opinion that he or she thinks the audience wants to hear. In cases like these, I found personal relationships particularly helpful. The more that I got to know Costa Rican students on a personal level, the more they were willing to open up to me intellectually. In writing center sessions with students from backgrounds like this, it is important to spend more initial time laying a groundwork for working together—and to encourage these students to come back for a second, third, or fourth session, by which time they may be more comfortable sharing their thoughts.

A second important lesson has been that of the usefulness of verbal interplay as a tutoring strategy. However, I am not the first researcher to identify the importance of verbal interplay in Latin American classrooms. In Mexico, for instance, two studies recently concluded that students in Mexican schools find writing formal and alienating, while they are more comfortable and expressive in speech (Hall 396; Smith 779). In this case, it is likely that such students would be more responsive to writing center sessions that focus initially on verbal debate rather than textual analysis. Moreover, in order to help these students gain comfort with writing, we can try to engage the text itself as an active participant: to convert it into a living voice rather than a static document. If documentation feels staunch and off-putting, then our job as tutors is to help make it come alive by showing the student the reasons for the author's arguments: *What is the author saying? Where does he or she come from? Why might s/he have this agenda?* In this way, we can help ESL writers, especially those from Latin America, begin to view writing as constructed and negotiable, just as verbal interplay can be. An approach like this is one way that we can adopt the practices from a student's country of origin and apply it to work at a U.S. institution. By adopting practices familiar to such students, we help them develop an empowered writing identity not based exclusively on U.S. concepts but also on their own familiar values and practices. By blending their former experiences and expertise with the new expectations they encounter in U.S. institutions, these students will be more likely to become successful with American rhetorical preferences, at the same time that they appreciate and preserve rhetorical preferences from their home cultures. Finally, while I offer these insights with a particular eye toward the challenges that ESL writers face, I likewise recognize the similarity of the challenges that *all* writers encounter. Learning how to write for a college audience, for instance, even English-speaking mainstream students are forced to rethink their identities and their positions as readers and writers. To that end, the concerns and techniques described in this article may well serve us all—regardless of the particular community that we serve.<sup>2</sup>



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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For instance, consider the excellent video put out by Oregon State University, *Writing Across Borders*: <<http://cwl.oregonstate.edu/wab/tutors.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to offer special thanks to Rotary International—particularly the Downtown Club of Vancouver, WA—for the financial support that made the research for this article possible.



## TUTOR'S COLUMN

### A COMMA-FUSED PAST: RELATING TO THE MISTAKES OF TUTEES

◆ *Conan M. Griffin*  
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*Ft. Myers, Florida*

I distinctly remember, even now, the excitement I felt when I first learned the wide and varied uses of the semi-colon. I was in an American literature survey course, which puts me roughly somewhere in my sophomore year of college—not too long ago, really. I cannot testify as to how many different ways I used the semi-colon up until then. But the day I got my first paper back, I stared at the big circles around each of my own misused semi-colons and followed arrows to side-notes that read “ind. cl.; ind. cl.,” which I naturally assumed was Latin.

Once the notes were explained—the necessity of independent clauses on either side of a semi-colon—I took to using that punctuation mark much as an addict would. Any of those old-time authors (Defoe, for instance) who wrote before the period became common within paragraphs would have been proud of the gusto with which I added semi-colons to my work. I was a child with a new toy, showing it off to my friends and family, indiscriminately bespangling my e-mails and letters with this exalted punctuation mark. No one could stop me. Even professors were powerless to stem the tide of semi-colons that appeared within my pages. They admonished against such widespread use; they took off points from my papers: I dubbed them philistines and carried on.

It would be many long semesters before I began to accept that my precious semi-colon was not some plaything to be carelessly tossed around like a football on a Sunday afternoon. And I was naturally perturbed when my irreverent use of what had become a dear friend started becoming clear. This dawning realization of my abusiveness was cathartic, yet it was only slowly, over the course of many more semesters, that I started to redress the wrongs of my past. At first, I trusted myself only to supervised visitation with my dear semi-colon; this forced separation gave me renewed respect for my old companion. Eventually, in an upper-level British literature course, I conquered my addiction and was finally able to use the semi-colon with what I knew to be mastery, precision, and grace. We had finally become comrades in arms in the vast trenches of academic writing. It is a closeness we have retained ever since.

I was, however, reminded of our unseemly beginnings the other day during a quiet dinner with my fiancée, Julianna. As we ate, I told her of a challenging student that I had tutored that morning. (As English graduate students who work together in our university's Writing Center, we share many such stories). I was relating to her how frustrating it was that this student, whom I will call Sarah, was very resistant to any suggestions that I made about her paper, particularly those relating to clarifying ideas and sentences.

I told Julianna how the session had begun much as many others. Sarah came into the Writing Center and signed in. After introducing ourselves, we sat down together at my table, and she started reading her paper aloud. While her paper had good development, some of her sentences sounded awkward. I pointed to these as we came to them and asked her if she could perhaps rephrase them for me. I said I wanted her to clarify some of the ideas so I could better understand what she was trying to convey with a particular passage. Sarah did so willingly, even animatedly; she spoke with enthusiasm and precision. I told her how much clearer these verbal explanations were, and I pointed to the paper to indicate that much of the meaning she had voiced was missing from her sentences. I recommended she use her own clear restatements as substitutes so that her reader could more easily understand the material.

Yet, despite my best efforts, Sarah was hesitant to alter her work. She resisted making any substantial changes even though the original text would be substituted with her own rephrased sentences. She said that she preferred the paper as it was. Try as I might, I could not convince Sarah to make adjustments that I knew would improve her piece. When she left, her paper much as it had been upon her arrival, I felt somewhat inadequate. More than that, I felt frustrated and wondered why she had even come into the Writing Center if she did not want to change anything. After all, wasn't the point of coming to a writing center to get help improving a paper?

When I finished relating my tale, Julianna shook her head in a way that was meant (I am convinced) to illustrate that I am an altogether silly person. And though I should have left well enough alone, I questioned her. She said I was much like that student, often claiming, “I intend for it to read like that” or “My readers should be able to follow me here” whenever she suggests changes to my work. She began to openly laugh as I denied and qualified my own resistance with the fact that I am an English graduate student, which, incidentally, means I probably write more convoluted sentences than Sarah ever will.

While I suppose my protestations that night were a bit comical, the entire episode reminded me of something very important: regardless of the roadblocks that tutees face, at some point, we tutors have faced the same or similar stumblings in our own writing. And regardless of when we learned the importance of verb-tense agreement or avoiding split infinitives, each of us still faces issues with our prose. Though perhaps our problems seem more complex now, it may not have been that long ago that we struggled with those simpler concerns. If you find it hard to believe, go back and glance at one of those old, old papers (most likely written on papyrus), and you might be shocked at what you find.

We all learn at different paces, and some may never learn the joys of the semi-colon. Yet, as we tutor, it would behoove us to remember our own foibles because the ability to do so will allow us to better relate to our tutees and can help provide that sometimes elusive common ground. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Paulo Freire writes that “Women and men are capable of being educated only to the extent that they are capable of recognizing themselves as unfinished. Education does not make us educable. It is our awareness of being unfinished that makes us educable” (58). This passage always reminds me that I, like my students or tutees, am unfinished—we share that imperfection. Remembering this, I remember to be compassionate and patient with each person who has the guts to put her paper before my scrutinizing eye. Perhaps if I say the right thing, or smile once in awhile, I will give her the strength to come back again.

The awakening I had that night over dinner and my recollection of Freire’s words did not bring about a pedagogical shift in my tutoring. Instead, the change came in the attitude with which I approach tutees. It came in the relaxed attitude and calm, steady tone that have become hallmarks of my tutoring style. I suppose that Freire would have appreciated this because I think he meant that educability is an attitude as much as it is the outward manifestations of pedagogy. All my experiences with his writing since my first introduction to it in a Composition Pedagogy course, have shown me that his was seldom a philosophy restricted to particulars; his is a philosophy of ideals and feelings more than anything else.

These realizations have helped me work with many tutees since, including Sarah. Yes, Sarah has been back. She even allowed me to tutor her again. This time, I was armed with the knowledge that we shared a commonality: we were both averse to change. Just as I had once been protective of my semi-colons, Sarah was the same regarding her awkward phrases. They were her own, and she believed in them. This knowledge allows me to come to her with a more open mind and calm demeanor, and I truly believe this is one of the reasons that her apprehensions and guardedness have subsided with each new session we have together. While she still patiently explains to me her awkward phrases—which appear less and less—once in a while, she changes something. I hope that I can say the same, that I have matured and am more open to comments about my writing. Though when I asked my fiancée about my progress, she smiled a little and resumed her own work.



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# CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

**May 1, 2009:** Nebraska Writing Centers Consortium, in Lincoln, NE

**Contact:** Conference website: <<http://wwfp.mccneb.edu/writingcenter/nwcc.htm>>.

**October 22-24, 2009:** Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Rapid City, SD

**Contact:** Christopher Ervin ([cervin@usd.edu](mailto:cervin@usd.edu)) or Greg Dyer ([greg.dyer@usioxfalls.edu](mailto:greg.dyer@usioxfalls.edu)). Conference website: <<http://pages.usioxfalls.edu/mwca/mwca09/>>.

## TAKE NOTE

### NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PEER TUTORING IN WRITING

November 6-8, 2009

South Hadley, MA

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For further information, contact Laura Greenfield, phone: 413-538-2173, e-mail: [lgreenfi@mtholyoke.edu](mailto:lgreenfi@mtholyoke.edu). Conference website: <[www.ncptw.org](http://www.ncptw.org)>.



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