

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E W T T L E R

Volume 34, Number 2

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

October, 2009

## – FROM THE EDITOR –

This month's issue of *WLN* offers several examples of collaboration. Noreen Lape writes about a project she conducted with her tutors to produce podcasts, illustrating for us how knowledge that tutors possess can be shared via podcasts. And the Tutor's Column in this issue was written by two of those tutors, Brooke Cosby and Danielle Melissovas Thompson. They reflect on what they learned as they produced the podcast, and they offer advice to other tutors who may be considering such work.

In their co-authored article about collaborating to introduce writing centers into secondary schools, Elise Bishop, Mary Beth Calkin, Dana Courter, Stacy DeWitt-Beller, and Judi Easton describe for us the high school writing centers that resulted.

And Jackie Grutsch McKinney provides us with another of her informative Geek in the Center columns, this time explaining how instant messaging (IM) is used in her writing center and the advantages IM-ing has provided.

There are also a few job announcements and calls for proposals, some with October deadlines. The vagaries of U.S. Postal Service bulk mail mean that some of us receive our issues of *WLN* the first week of the month while others may not get issues as promptly. I hope this issue arrives in time for those of you who wish to respond before the looming deadlines of those job announcements and proposal submissions.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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## GIVING VOICE TO TUTORS' REALLY USEFUL KNOWLEDGE: A NEW PLAN FOR WRITING CENTER PODCASTS

◆ Noreen Lape

(Formerly of Columbus State University, Columbus, GA)  
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In the past few years, podcasting has become a tool not only for college professors but also for writing centers. Examining the use of podcasting in college courses, Ashley Deal, Academic Technology Research Analyst at Carnegie Mellon University, identifies three ways podcasts are used in courses: by instructors to deliver class lectures (coursecasting), by instructors to provide ancillary course material, and by students to create assignments (4). Following suit, many writing centers have begun to produce podcasts that range from service advertisements to supplemental instruction to writing-related interviews. Yet Deal finds that "too much of the excitement surrounding podcasting is excitement about technology itself, not about demonstrated improvements in . . . learning" (10). When it comes to podcasting (or technology in general), writing centers would do well to proceed mindfully and not blindly adopt the latest techno-fad but rather theorize and create a product with lasting value.

Those who are excited but cautious about podcasting anticipate some of the possible pitfalls, particularly in regard to "coursecasting." Deal finds no clear data to show that students learn more or even better by listening to podcasts. Instead, because coursecasts enable  
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students to “make up” missed classes, some instructors are concerned that coursecasts will deter students from attending class. Deal quotes an instructor at the Harvard Extension school: “the true value of podcasting is its potential not necessarily to educate better, but to educate further” (6). The implied caveat speaks to writing center directors as well: while distance-learning capabilities are seductive, we also have a responsibility to create podcasts that support our best practices.

Some current innovators have created useful podcasts that complement writing center pedagogy while appealing to multiple audiences. Texas A&M, for example, puts out two series. “Write Away,” the faculty podcast, offers interviews with writing-intensive course instructors who discuss “common concerns in teaching writing.” “Write Right,” the student podcast, provides supplemental instruction or mini-lessons on topics like revision and proofreading and interpreting assignments. Like Texas A&M, the University of Wisconsin–Madison offers mini-lessons; in one podcast students can learn about APA documentation. What’s more, Wisconsin produces podcast interviews with writing center administrators, like the one on assessment featuring Neal Lerner and Jason Mayland (Vee, et al.). Both Texas A&M and Wisconsin–Madison target not only writers but also instructors and administrators, thereby addressing the needs of the larger writing center community.

Though podcasting is still in its relative infancy, some writing center administrators have begun to theorize about pedagogically-grounded podcasting. Viewing composition as a “network of several sites made up of distinct audiences,” Doug Dangler, Ben McCorkle, and Time Barrow of Bowling Green State University seek to “imagine more innovative uses of podcasting.” Thus, they propose a three-tiered plan in which writers and writing teachers discuss writing, students and tutors comment on the writing center, and administrators share institutional writing concerns. (Dangler’s podcasting project, “Podcasting to promote the craft of writing,” comes from the Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing at Ohio State University.) Like Deal, they warn about using podcasting in a way that “merely replicates current services and resources without adding anything of value to them.” Assuming the purpose of “current services and resources” is to support the teaching and learning of writing, they raise the seminal question: what is the added value of a podcast?

As I pondered their point, I recalled Marilyn Cooper’s essay, “Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers,” and its challenge to tutors to “cast themselves as radical intellectuals.” Cooper imagines a writing center that critiques university tradition, one in which tutors “become agents of change in writing pedagogy, helping teachers create better assignments, letting teachers know what students are having trouble with. As intellectuals, tutors contribute both to the endeavor of helping students learn about writing and to the endeavor of creating useful knowledge about writing” (59). Most writing center directors would agree with Cooper’s suggestion that tutors are often the recipients of special knowledge about the teaching and learning of writing. For years, in staff meetings, training courses, and informal conversations, I have been privy to tutors’ “really useful knowledge,” but with no institutionally accepted way to enable them to broadcast that knowledge—that is, until the advent of podcasts. Now I am collaborating with one of my undergraduate peer tutors, Brooke Cosby, to envision a podcast series that critiques the learning environment, instigating change by delivering useful tutor knowledge about writing.

The first production in this series is “A Student Manifesto on Written Feedback,” co-created by Brooke and fellow tutor Danielle Thompson. The podcast came about after Nancy Sommers, during a campus visit to offer faculty workshops on responding to student writing, met with writing tutors and student writers and made a conscious effort to draw forth tutors’ really useful knowledge. Poised with pen and paper in hand, Sommers asked: “What kind of feedback do you want from your instructors?” Slowly, they started offering answers, building on each other’s insights and personal experiences. Sommers listened with interest, looking straight at each person who spoke while her hand continued writing, recording each comment.

She later sent me her dictation, and after a few minor editorial changes, we had “The Student Manifesto on Written Feedback.”

An assertion of self-empowerment, “The Manifesto” is a declaration of learners’ rights in which the students urge instructors to consider the humans behind the essays they grade. They beckon faculty to “use comments to create a relationship with us—reader to writer”; to “assume that we want to become stronger writers and to learn from your comments”; “to bolster our agency as writers and to deepen our thinking”; to “notice themes and patterns in our writing, rather than point out random or arbitrary mistakes”; and to “discuss the rubric in class, for then the rubric informs our writing process, and we can learn from it.” A few months after Sommers’s visit, Brooke and Danielle filmed and edited the three-minute audiovisual podcast version (the podcast can be accessed at <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=93J\\_0Qxsci4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93J_0Qxsci4)>).

Why film “The Manifesto,” though, when a perfectly good written version exists online? Does the audio have more value than the written text? Does adding a visual component further enhance the production? Before the podcast was made, Sommers used the text version in workshops at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and the University of Arizona. However, when on February 2, 2009, I posted the podcast version on YouTube and then sent an announcement to the WCenter listserv, not only did several people on the listserv offer immediate feedback, but as of March 23, 2009, the podcast was viewed 577 times across the nation. One viewer, Elizabeth Lee, Associate Dean of the Academic Learning Center at Baton Rouge Community College, asked permission to use “The Manifesto” podcast at a faculty development workshop on teacher feedback. While the written “Manifesto” could just as easily have been shared online, the podcast enabled Lee’s writing instructors to receive the really useful knowledge via my tutors’ actual voices.

Another way a podcast adds value to the written text is through the “explaining voice.” Gardner Campbell, Assistant Vice President for Teaching and Learning Technologies at the University of Mary Washington, discusses the power of the spoken word in podcasting: “There’s considerable value in what I call ‘the explaining voice,’ the voice that performs understanding.” He finds that the explaining voice “doesn’t just convey information.”

The explaining voice conveys microcues of hesitation, pacing, and inflection that demonstrate both cognition and metacognition. When we hear someone read with understanding, we participate in that understanding, almost as if the voice is enacting our own comprehension. In other words, the explaining voice trains the ear to listen not just for meaning but for evidence of the thought that generates meaning. (42)

The explaining voices of the six students who perform a reading of “The Manifesto” range from subdued to demanding to annoyed. The overall tone is assertive, bordering on confrontational—a voice students rarely use with professors to assert their rights as learners (but, at times, may use to demand a higher grade). According to Campbell, the microcues in tone, inflection, and pacing—cues that do not exist in the text version—allow the listener to participate in understanding. When I posted “The Manifesto” on a listserv at my university, a colleague who teaches the College Success course to first-year students stopped by my office to share his response: “I was halfway through grading my papers when I saw ‘The Manifesto,’ and it changed the comments I put on the papers. . . . In the past I just told them what they had done wrong. This caused me to tell them what they could do better.” During a focus group discussion in which Columbus State University faculty

*“I offer a challenge to writing centers to use podcasting as a tool to extract and collect tutors’ really useful knowledge, give voice to that knowledge, and provoke a campus-wide conversation that could change the teaching of writing.”*

## TAKE NOTE

### IWCA WRITING CENTERS COLLABORATIVE @ CCCC

March 17, 2010

Galt House Hotel, Louisville, KY

*"Re-Envisioning the Writing Center"*

Tutoring pedagogy is nothing if not dynamic. Students who use writing centers expect that tutors/coaches/collaborators will adapt to meet their individual needs. Tutors, for their part, often pull from their repertoire of proven strategies but must also experiment with new approaches when facing a novel situation. Sometimes their revision of tutoring strategies is successful, other times not, but in each instance it's necessary to reflect on, re-theorize, and re-envision tutoring practice and name the limits and possibilities.

Likewise, writing centers must also be dynamic and adaptable. They must respond to new situations and to change in positive and productive ways. They must address internal and external forces that require centers to revise or re-conceive their praxis. The 2010 IWCA Writing Centers Collaborative @ CCCC focuses on that re-envisioning.

All proposals are due by October 16, 2009.

For full CFP, information on program format, and proposal guidelines, please visit <http://www.writingcenters.org>.

gave feedback on our podcasts, one professor commented that the video affected her "deeply, and really got the students' message into my mind. I could 'hear' them with my thinking brain and compassionate brain." These responses exemplify Campbell's belief that "podcasting can reveal . . . the essential humanity at the heart of higher education" (42).

Like the audio, the visual component of "The Manifesto" adds extra value. The students who perform "The Manifesto" are more than just "talking heads" as is the case with some audiovisual coursecasts. As directors, Brooke and Danielle purposefully chose the music, setting, camera angles, and poses. "The Manifesto" begins with brassy music and a scrolling text introduction (an homage to Star Wars). The first scene is a medium shot of all six actors, the writing center's moody and dramatic student artwork on the wall behind them. The cast represents both genders and several ethnicities. The first narrator sits in front of the others and straddles a chair turned backwards; others lean against furniture, and one sits on top of the couch with his feet on the seat – all assuming postures of defiance. Some actors are paired in various shots, one delivering a point while the other stays silent, nodding in agreement or folding her arms across her chest and staring straight at the camera. Other actors appear alone in scenes. One woman stands on a chair behind an armor-like partition, assertively proclaiming her point as she towers above the camera/viewer that looks up at her. In contrast, a soft-spoken young man delivers his lines in a subdued voice, the camera intimately framing him in a close shot. The carefully chosen shots, taken together, create a visual effect that conveys a sense of solidarity, authority, intensity, edginess, supporting the pacing and inflection of the explaining voice. The visual image, then, complements the projected mission of the writing center as a place that welcomes diversity, builds community, and operates as a safe haven where students learn to voice their needs as writers. In fact, one freshman composition professor who participated in the focus group astutely remarked: "[F]reshmen especially . . . aren't empowered enough . . . to ask for this kind of feedback. . . . [S]eeing students that are empowered enough to say, 'This is what I want. I am paying for this' . . . I think that it will kind of make them see that it is okay to ask for that and that they have a right to get better than 'Great job. B.' That's what I liked about that, that the [written version] does not give you."

Not only the existence but the quality of the explaining voice adds value to the podcast. An educational researcher in multimedia studies, Richard E. Mayer, and his colleagues performed an experiment in which they gave students a narrated multimedia program that explained the respiratory system. The students who received the personalized conversational narration scored significantly higher on post-tests than did the students who received the nonpersonalized formal narration, a finding, the researchers conclude, that is consistent with personalization theory. Using "I" and "you" pronouns throughout a multimedia program—or, by extension, a podcast—enhances learning. Mayer explains, "Using the self as a reference point increases the learner's interest, which in turn encourages the learner to use available cognitive capacity for active cognitive processing of the incoming information during learning. The deeper process results in more meaningful learning. . . ." ("Personalization" 391). The "I" and "you" pronouns also make the podcast more of a "social communication" than an information monologue. According to social agency theory, when a podcast creates a social bond with the audience through personalized language, the audience "engages in a sense-making process that includes selecting relevant information, organizing it into a coherent representation, integrating it with other knowledge, and encoding it in memory." Alternatively, when the podcast is an information monologue, the audience uses "cognitive processing aimed solely at acquiring information rather than trying to understand it." (Mayer, Sobko, and Mautone, "Social" 420). Thus, the most effective audio media reflects writing center best practices: interpersonal engagement, social interaction, and active learning. Based on Mayer et al.'s research, we should be making podcasts that are personalized social communications, enabling listeners to synthesize, integrate, and retain content.

As Brooke, one of my tutors, and I work together on the podcasting series, we have sought out ways to give voice to students, to assist them in articulating their needs and understanding in order to access their useful knowledge. Brooke is currently producing audio podcasts that investigate students' knowledge of discourse

conventions. The purpose is to educate students about discourse conventions but also to illuminate the convergence and the gap between faculty and student understanding of good writing in the interest of provoking dialogue. In one such podcast, for example, two senior biology majors and a physics professor describe science writing to Brooke.<sup>1</sup> While the biology students describe science writing in formalist terms, delineating the parts of a lab report, the physics professor explains the social and rhetorical contexts. Several science faculty members in our focus group immediately noticed the contrast. As one shared, “Those students are advanced students . . . and for them to be so fixated on the steps still . . . means I haven’t done my job teaching really what a lab report is supposed to be in their minds. It still seems it was like steps. It’s not bringing it all together in one coherent whole.” Viewing “The Manifesto” led the focus group to other equally important insights. Responding to the request for “specific, not generic” comments, a faculty member admitted: “I don’t often talk to other faculty about what I am doing in my writing feedback. So are my comments specific or generic? I don’t even know.” Another disclosed that because she lacks expertise when it comes to talking about syntax, she crosses out and rewrites awkward sentences for students. She stated, “I am at a loss as to how to tell them—‘You know, there is something wrong with this sentence’—without totally going and redoing it. And so I find myself making a lot fewer comments. . . because of that fear.” Through our podcasts that present really useful knowledge about (and from) student writers, these faculty have developed insights that call attention to the areas in which they need development when it comes to teaching writing.

“The Manifesto” became not only the basis for a podcast but also the inspiration for a whole approach to podcasting and writing center work. Like radical intellectuals, writing center tutors can give voice to the masses—student writers. As Cooper states, “the continuous contact with the needs and experiences of writing students moves tutors to critique, to observe both what the traditional practices of writing instruction yield and what they inhibit” (63). In my follow-up conversations with Sommers, she spoke of the useful knowledge—unmined and often hidden—that exists in writing centers. Sensitive to the unique position undergraduate peer tutors occupy, she remarked: “[tutors] see and know so much about undergraduate writing.” She then posited the question: “How do we tap into their learning and knowledge?” And having tapped into that knowledge, how might we, in the words of Nancy Grimm, “open a dialogue with English departments and with the institution as a whole, to rethink the way we practice literacy, to renegotiate a relationship with teachers of writing” (6)? I offer a challenge to writing centers to use podcasting as a tool to extract and collect tutors’ really useful knowledge, give voice to that knowledge, and provoke a campus-wide conversation that could change the teaching of writing. ♦

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> To listen to “Writing in the Sciences,” visit <[http://writingcenter.colstate.edu/video\\_resources/video-Resources.asp](http://writingcenter.colstate.edu/video_resources/video-Resources.asp)>.



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## TAKE NOTE

### EUROPEAN WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Call for Proposals

May 24-28, 2010

Paris, France

*“Crossing national boundaries and linguistic borders: (Re)Thinking and (Re) Situating the Writing Center and WAC connection in Europe and Beyond”*

Keynote speakers: Muriel Harris, Chris Anson, and Anne-Marie Picard.

Suggested formats for presentations: individual presentations (20 minutes with 10 minutes of Q/A; workshops (60 minutes); 60-minute multi-presenter panels; and poster presentations and exhibits. A list of suggested topics and more information about the conference are available on the conference website: <http://ewca.sabanciuniv.edu/eng/?bulletin/bulletin.html>.

Deadline for proposal submissions: January 10, 2010; notification of acceptance: February 20, 2010. Deadline for registration: April 1, 2010.

Come and join us, listen to the writing-centered heartbeat and give momentum to its pumping energy internationally.

(Continued on page 13)

# GEEK IN THE CENTER

◆ Jackie Grutsch McKinney  
Ball State University  
Muncie, IN

## INSTANT MESSAGING

A couple of years ago in our writing center at Ball State University, I noticed two things happening that I began to see as related: our phone was ringing less and less, and our tutors were using instant messaging (IM) for their own personal communication more and more. Instant messaging, as most people know, is real-time text-based chat, computer user to computer user. If e-mail is a substitute for mail, then IM is a substitute for a phone conversation.<sup>1</sup> Though early precursors to IM date to the 1960s, instant messaging as we now know it took off in the late 1990s. Some IM programs allow for audio or video chat, desktop sharing, and file exchange, making them rather robust, feature-rich programs. All of this made me wonder if IM might play a useful, official role in our writing center.

Though writing center scholars have yet to really address IM use specifically, there is evidence from other related sources that writing center IM use might be beneficial. For instance, Christina M. Desai and Stephanie J. Graves compared face-to-face interactions and IM interactions of reference librarians. They found that the interactions were different, but they were comparable in providing instruction and meeting the clients' needs. Others, like Kara Monroe and Donna DeGannaro, have demonstrated how IM can be an important link for classroom teachers and their students. Gloria Jacobs found that students' IM use does not erase students' school-writing proficiency and in fact might add to it. Research on IM in the arena of linguistics and literacy studies is also promising; Sali Tagliamonte and Derek Denis found that IM language patterns in fact follow grammatical structures and are an interesting hybrid genre occupying a space between speech and writing (also see Hult and Richins).

## HOW COULD WE USE IM IN A WRITING CENTER?

Though there surely are many possibilities, a writing center might consider creating an IM account for one of these reasons:

- *Online Tutoring.* Some centers, such as those at Syracuse University and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, have used IM for online tutoring. They exchange documents through other programs (like Google Docs and Dropio) and meet students on IM to discuss drafts. Since these programs are free and usually familiar to students, using IM for online tutoring is a great idea, especially in tough financial times. The addition of video and audio chat capabilities in many IM programs makes this possibility even more appealing, particularly in light of Melanie Yergeau, Kathryn Wozniak, and Peter Vandenberg's engaging article, "Expanding the Space of f2f," on audio-visual-textual conferencing.
- *Staff Communication.* IM can facilitate discussions between tutors and between tutors and administrators, too. As director, I don't have an office in my writing center, but I've found that tutors are more likely to IM me through our tutor account than to call or come find me down the hall. Tutors will also ask each other questions via IM and even connect with alumni tutors who are still on our buddy list. Our IM account has been likewise helpful at satellite locations where we do not have a phone.

- *Quick Questions.* The primary purpose for our adding IM to our services was to allow for something different than a tutoring session—another point of contact for what we just called “quick questions.” We envisioned it as a sort of 21st century redux of the grammar hotline, where users would not share a draft with us, but just ask their most pressing questions when they most needed answers. The University of West Georgia center uses IM for a similar reason.

## GETTING STARTED & LOGISTICS

No matter what end you envision, if you want to get started with IM in your center, you’ll need to start an account. There are many programs available for instant messaging, like AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), Yahoo Instant Messenger, Windows Live Messenger, GTalk (from Google), and Facebook chat. It used to be the case that if you created an account in one IM platform, say AIM, you could only IM with others who also were on AIM. This is less the case now, as there are programs like Meebo that allow you to IM with contacts on several platforms. Likewise, several writing centers, including ours, embed an IM chat box on our home page, so users do not need to have any sort of account at all—they just start typing (for example, see <<http://writing.iweb.bsu.edu>>).

If you are using a chat box on a webpage, you would provide clients with your URL. If not, you would need to share your username so clients could connect with you via IM. Most IM programs open a buddy list that shows which of your contacts are online and available. The programs allow users to set their “away” messages, so contacts know whether someone is able to chat. For instance, when we don’t have any tutors watching the IM, we have a simple “away” message that says, “Sorry, no tutors are currently available.” For us, when a tutor is at the front desk, that tutor takes IM questions. Though this means our IM system is not available every hour we are open, it is available often enough for now. If demand increases, we might be able to reorganize staff accordingly.

When someone begins a chat with you, a window will open up with his or her message. There is a box where you can type back a reply within that window. In most programs, if someone else also wants to chat with you at the same time, another window will pop up. Whom you communicate with is within your control; you are able to block users and adjust privacy settings to your liking.

The key to communicating in IM is to keep your phrases short and quick. There is no character limit (unlike Twitter), but the convention is such that if a user has a longer idea to communicate, he or she will break it down into several phrases. You do not see the exact same turn-taking of oral conversation. It is not surprising or awkward for a user to enter several phrases before the other user replies. Many users have adopted a shorthand IM style with acronyms and emoticons; however, deciphering such style is not difficult with resources such as the Acronym Dictionary (<http://www.aim.com/acronyms.adp>) or a quick Google search of a term you don’t understand.

## CAVEATS

Now two years and hundreds of chats later, I feel confident that adopting IM in our writing center was a positive decision. However, there are things folks ought to consider. For one, users can be more or less anonymous in IM. I admit that I was afraid we might get some inappropriate comments, but to date, we haven’t. We haven’t had to block a single user. I’ve also had a few writing center directors ask me if I think we might be compromising the mission of our writing center by providing quick answers to those “quick questions.” In short, I don’t. I think IM meets the student at his or her point of need. Many of our users have looked for an answer elsewhere and did not understand what they found or wanted to double-check that they were applying it correctly. I’m happy to be a part of the student’s process in this way.<sup>2</sup>

We will continue to use IM at our center, and I look forward to seeing how other centers use IM and what they learn from doing so. Although writing center professionals have a pretty rich understanding of tutoring—espe-

# NEWS

## DIRECTOR, WRITING CENTER AND WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

Tenure-track Assistant Professor position in rhetoric and composition, beginning Fall 2010. Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition by Fall 2010 required. The director provides leadership and coordination through the Boise State Writing Center (including recruiting, mentoring, and supervising undergraduate consultants) and would have the opportunity to enhance, coordinate, and provide increased visibility for WAC initiatives on campus. The teaching assignment is 2-1, including a writing-consultant training course, with most faculty teaching a combination of undergraduate and graduate courses. Experience in writing center or writing program administration is required. Excellence in teaching, scholarly publication, and service is required for academic advancement. <http://english.boisestate.edu>\*

\*Application Procedures: \*Send a letter of application addressing teaching philosophy and research interests, curriculum vitae, transcripts, and a minimum of three letters of recommendation to:  
Professor Michelle Payne  
Chair, Department of English  
Boise State University Search [AS-0002-90]  
1910 University Dr.  
Boise, ID 83725-1525  
E-mail: [english@boisestate.edu](mailto:english@boisestate.edu)

Review of applications will begin November 2, 2009. Applications received after that point may be considered if the position is not filled from the initial applicant pool. EOE/AA Institution

cially face-to-face tutoring sessions—as a field we have paid less attention to other ways of engaging students. I believe the potential is there for IM to be another way to engage and enrich our relationships with clients, within our staffs, and potentially, with our communities. ♦

### Notes

1. Instant messaging is for communicating via computers. Texting (or text messaging) is a similar service for short, written messages from cell phone to cell phone. Increasingly, there is overlap between the two because some IM applications allow users to send text messages and can be used on smart phones.

2. We do not collect any information from our IM users, so they may or may not be students at our university. If a center wanted to restrict IM use to students on campus, they have a few options. They could simply screen users by asking for a student ID number or name to confirm the user is a member of the campus community. They could use the chat function in a closed course management system, like Blackboard or WebCT, or they could have their chat set up behind a page that requires a student to log in.



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## RAISING WRITING CENTERS: THE BOOM IN SOUTHWEST MISSOURI PUBLIC SCHOOLS

◆ *Elise Bishop, College of the Ozarks, Pt. Lookout, MO; Mary Beth Calkin and Dana Courter, Branson High School, Branson, MO; Stacy DeWitt-Beller, Fair Grove High School, Fair Grove, MO; and Judi Easdon, Branson Junior High School, Branson, MO*

In a September 2007 *Writing Lab Newsletter* article, “Bringing Public Schools to Writing Centers: A Tragi-Comic Tale of One Director’s Efforts,” Susan Stadig and I describe the behind-the-scenes drama of producing a writing center at Branson Intermediate School in Branson, MO. The last sentence of that article reads “And if we should eventually help the high school recognize the benefits of establishing its own writing center, what an ovation that would be!”

Since aspiring to that goal two years ago, my staff in the Center for Writing and Thinking (CWT) and I have had the chance to help two high schools and a junior high set up writing centers of their own. This article—like the previous one—details how we did it. This time, though, I get out of the way as much as possible to let the directors narrate their efforts to bring their brainchildren into the world. While my narrative encourages college writing centers to reach out to the local schools in their communities, the directors’ stories communicate how different schools created and nurtured their own writing centers. Although each is at a different stage of development, all are healthy and thriving.



### BRANSON (MO) HIGH SCHOOL (EST. SEPT. 2008 )

In October 2007, the principal of the Branson Intermediate School presented the September *WLN* article at the local school board meeting. I hoped the publicity would spawn a writing center for Branson High School, but the idea never took root.

Then, without warning, a teacher from the high school, Dana Courter, contacted me in February of 2008. She had heard about our writing center from a surprising source: one of my former students, her student teacher at the time. She stated, “We are writing a proposal to implement a writing lab on our campus that will assist students in their writing skills. If you are willing, we would love to set up a meeting with you to tour the Center for Writing and Thinking .”

Unbeknownst to me, Dana and one of her fellow teachers, Mary Beth Calkin, had realized that Branson High needed a writing center. When I met with them, I found that they had done their homework and had written a compelling proposal for their administrators. In it, they presented the results of separate surveys they had conducted with teachers and students, concluding that “what we [teachers] see in the classroom as ‘lack of motivation’ is really lack [of] confidence [in nearly half of our students] to independently complete writing projects.” The two teachers emphasized that “developing writing skills and confidence continues to be key to building a successful education; therefore, it is time to seriously consider implementing a writing center.” A writing center, they argued, would give “each student the one-to-one guidance essential to improve writing skills and confidence.” What follows is their version of their vision coming to life.

#### MARY BETH CALKIN AND DANA COURTER:

Armed with statistics and plans, we were ready to champion our cause, and we proudly turned our plump proposal over to our principal. Perhaps he recognized the fanatical set to our faces, but in any

## TAKE NOTE

### MID-ATLANTIC WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Call for Proposals  
April 9-10, 2010  
Newark, Delaware  
*“Individuals Shaping Writing Centers — Writing Centers Shaping Individuals”*  
Keynote speaker: Neal Lerner

Call for Proposals: formats include presentations of 20-40 minutes; roundtable or panel discussion sessions of 10 minutes per presenter, workshops of 40 minutes (with audience participation), and poster sessions.

As a new addition to the conference, we’ll be hosting a Professional Development Workshop on April 9th. For CFPs and more information about the conference and the workshop, please visit <<http://www.mawcaonline.org/2010/index.html>>, or e-mail us at [MAWCAconference2010@english.udel.edu](mailto:MAWCAconference2010@english.udel.edu).

Conference co-chairs: Melissa Ianetta, Barbara Gaal Lutz, and Elizabeth Keenan.

event he offered his full support and soon followed with a room and furniture for our fledgling center. We had been given the opportunity. Now, no excuses. We had the facility; now we needed the coaches. We narrowed our choices to juniors and seniors and then asked for teacher recommendations. We trimmed the original list to around thirty solid prospects. Before we opened our doors in September, we took our students to the CWT for a two-hour training session. In this session, the college tutors shared the importance of being a coach, walked our students through a typical coaching session, and warned us of the obstacles we were sure to face.

At the beginning of the new school year, a majority of our clients were reluctant underclassmen required to attend a coaching session, but most students left with a positive attitude, and many returned with their next writing assignment. Solangie, a freshman, reflected on her first experience in the writing center: "My writing coach... did not simply tell me what to put in. She prompted a phrase and let me figure out the rest." Word of our welcoming environment and our beneficial services soon spread. As a result, we are now experiencing a large number of upperclass visitors. Hannah, a junior, paints a perfect picture of a typical coaching session: "She [my writing coach] helped me understand what was good about my writing and gave me ideas on how to improve it." Although we have received tremendous feedback from our clientele, perhaps our coaches have gained just as much from this experience. Riley, a junior and one of our valued writing coaches, stated, "The reward from this challenge of being a writing coach is that I grew to have better communication skills, not only in the writing center itself, but with people anywhere else."

Erin, a talented senior reflecting on her coaching experience, wrote, "My own writing has improved because I now ask myself the same questions I ask the students, such as 'What is my thesis?' and 'Do I have all the necessary elements?'" And it's not only the students who have noticed improvements. Nicole Masyk, a teacher at Branson High School, has required her students on several occasions to visit the writing center and has seen positive results: "The benefits of the writing center have been that students know they have a place to go should they need additional help in their classes, not just in writing, but in creating ideas." In order to justify a project of this scope, we must serve a significant portion of the student body. Nearly a third of the student population has taken advantage of the writing center at least once this year. In our first six months, we served approximately 500 students out of a student population of just over 1,200. These numbers have by far exceeded our goals at the beginning of this venture.

Accommodating students is our first priority; therefore, we are open three times daily four days a week and Friday mornings by appointment. One teacher has even set up appointments to bring in entire English classes in order to target her students' specific writing needs. Teaching writing is often considered the province of the English department; thus, the writing center is considered ours as well. One of our continuing struggles is convincing the entire staff that we welcome all writing projects, not just English term papers and essays. Next year, we will lobby for a position on the in-service agenda during the opening days of school to sell our center as a school-wide service for our teachers as well as our students. We will also encourage staff from other departments to train and work as advisors alongside our talented students, strengthening the bridges between disciplines.

Our student coaches have been invaluable to our success and take great pride in our center. They have offered excellent ideas to assist in continued success, including setting up an e-mail account for prospective clients to submit papers before their appointments. We would also like to build a website with links to online sources such as other writing center websites and to our writing center

e-mail account. Currently, our coaches are producing a promotional video that has something to do with *The Lord of the Rings*, a quest, and Gollum. We are expecting great things.

Although our student coaches have the skills and motivation needed to be successful, the biggest challenge we have faced all year is keeping the writing center staffed as often as we would like. Most of the writing coaches are also athletes and band members who are involved in countless other extracurricular activities in addition to being Honor Roll students with demanding academic schedules. We simply do not have enough coaches to meet the demand of our student population. Next year, we will not only look for a larger number of coaches, but we will also schedule mandatory monthly meetings to ensure all coaches are aware of and available during peak demand. In order to help keep our coaches motivated, the monthly meetings will also be used to celebrate individual successes, read evaluations, and share coaching experiences.

An interesting side note to the creation of the Branson High writing center was delivered via another e-mail from out of the blue, this one from the special education teacher there. Inspired by what she has seen in the new high school writing center, she now wants the CWT staff to train some of her special education students to conduct writing conferences with their counterparts at the site of our first writing center collaboration, Branson Intermediate School. This exciting project, if approved, will begin next fall.



### FAIR GROVE (MO) HIGH/MIDDLE SCHOOLS (EST. JAN. 2009)

The summer preceding the launch of the Branson High School writing center, I attended the Ozarks Writing Project Summer Invitational Institute at Missouri State University. There, I met expectant mom and fellow University Fellow Stacy DeWitt-Beller. She immediately embraced the idea of a writing center for her school and e-mailed a proposal to her principal before the institute ended in July. Permission to proceed soon followed. Despite the fact that her baby was due at any moment, Stacy continued feverishly planning for the birth of her writing center. She arranged for me to deliver a brief workshop that fall for the Fair Grove faculty to introduce the idea to them. I addressed about thirty teachers in their school's library, which connects the high school to the middle school. This writing center would be unique because it would be available to students of both schools. Not long after the birth of her daughter, Stacy arranged a field trip to the CWT for the thirty students she had invited to become writing assistants. What she and her assistants learned during the two-hour training that day broke some barriers later on.

#### STACY DEWITT-BELLER:

Most of the students at Fair Grove High School have lived in Fair Grove their entire lives, so I did not think they would necessarily need to know how to break the ice as part of their student assistant training at College of the Ozarks (C of O). During training, my student assistants were reminded that most people visiting the writing center are nervous about sharing their writing. Part of the job of the student assistant includes making the students seeking help feel comfortable before assessing their work. C of O trainers included suggestions for breaking the ice, such as playing a game, telling a joke, or simply finding something in common. After the Fair Grove center opened, one of my more dedicated student assistants, Dylan, felt a bit intimidated at the beginning of a particular writing center session with a student in a grade ahead of him. He later shared with me how he overcame his feeling of awkwardness [by suggesting] they play a game of tic-tac-toe.

“I knew the student because we have gone to school together for a long time,” Dylan explained, “but I didn’t know her that well. . . .well enough to tell her how to fix her paper. We were sitting there, and I was feeling kind of awkward. I remembered some of the suggestions at training, and I said, ‘We could play a game.’ The student turned the piece of paper over and said we should play a game of tic-tac-toe.” Even though Dylan was not successful in winning the game, he succeeded in making himself and the client feel more comfortable. As writing center directors, we need to remember that not only writing center customers may feel uncomfortable, but student assistants too. Whether they win or lose in a friendly game of tic-tac-toe, my students amaze and impress me.

Although the spring of 2009 officially marked the beginning of the writing center for middle and high school students at Fair Grove, we are a work in progress. However, I am pleased to share that we have assisted not only English classes but science classes as well. It just goes to show that when one thinks there’s a tool in the metaphorical tool belt we will never need, that will be the day we will use it the most. Overall, Dylan’s writing center session was a success. I know Fair Grove students have a friendly disposition, but I never knew they could be so creative at breaking the ice.



### BRANSON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL (EST. APRIL 2009)

While talking one day with Judi Easdon, the wife of a chemistry teacher at College of the Ozarks, I mentioned the CWT and gave her one of our brochures. Judi, the head of the Branson Junior High School communication arts department, was intrigued.

#### *JUDI EASDON:*

I took [the brochure] home and asked my husband about it. He told me how beneficial the center is for his chemistry students. I knew I needed more information. Elise Bishop suggested I read Richard Kent’s book, *A Guide to Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers: Grades 6-12*. [What was described in the book] sounded like what we needed at Branson Junior High. I e-mailed the Branson Intermediate School and high school and asked them to explain what they were doing [with their writing centers]. I took the ideas I had and presented them to my building principal. He gave me the go-ahead to do whatever I needed to do.

My next meeting was with the communication arts department at the junior high. I gave them information I had learned and asked if they wanted to proceed. We decided we needed to see the CWT for ourselves. During a collaboration meeting, we took a field trip to C of O. Here, Elise and the college students did a mock conference for us and answered our questions. At our next collaboration meeting, we came up with many ideas of what a writing center would look like at our building. Our biggest problem was who would staff the center. We wanted the C of O students, but this did not fit anyone’s schedule. Next, we checked with those writing-center-trained high school students. They also could not come at the time we needed, but next year we are looking into expanding to after-school hours when these students would be able to help. Another option was parent staffers. (We are continuing to look into this option for next year.) We decided to go with our final option—student staffers. The teachers nominated fifteen students currently in seventh grade. We sent them a letter explaining the center and asking if they would be willing to work [as writing coaches] one day a week this year and next. On February 27, we took these students to C of O for a two-hour training session led by the college students.

Our department decided our center would be open in my classroom every day during intervention time [a designated block of time built into each school day that supports students’ academic, social, and

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Director of the Writing Center Loyola University Maryland

The Writing Department of Loyola University Maryland seeks to hire a Director of the Writing Center, as an Asst. or Assoc. Professor of Writing, tenure-track/tenured, whose essential duties will include full participation in the life of the department: teaching core and major courses including Writing Center Theory & Practice; advising majors; engaging in department and college service; undertaking academic scholarship related to writing centers and WAC. Writing Center duties will include administering the budget; collecting and creating student and faculty resources; hiring, preparing and supervising tutors; participating in the Writing Center/Composition/WAC scholarly community; and collaborating with the Director of Composition to promote WAC.

Required Qualifications: Doctorate in appropriate area of study; Record of excellence in teaching writing at the college level; Record of writing scholarship in areas relevant to the position appropriate for rank; Demonstrated success in writing program administration; Interest in working with faculty across campus; Commitment to Jesuit education. Study of a wide range of writing including creative, critical, and professional; Experience in 1) preparation and supervision of graduate and undergraduate tutors; 2) WAC/WID or other multi and/or interdisciplinary initiatives; 3) teaching first-year writing 4) supporting ESL/ ELL students. Application Deadline: Applications received by October 15, 2009, will be given priority.

For more information please visit the website <<http://www.loyola.edu/writingcenter/>>, or contact Peggy O'Neill, Search Committee Chair at (410) 617-2404, or [poneill1@loyola.edu](mailto:poneill1@loyola.edu). Applicants should submit a CV, cover letter, writing sample, and list of references online at <<http://www.loyola.edu/HR/Employment/>>. The positions will be open until filled with preference given to applicants who apply by October 15, 2009. ♦

emotional development]. Two “student-staffers” would be available to assist the writers needing help. Our goal for this year is to get teachers from all content areas excited about this center. To help us do this, we have sent out a “press release” announcing our grand opening. Our greatest fear is not having students seek help. We are encouraging teachers to promote the center by making it part of the assignment requirement. As we take this first leap, we know the center is like a piece of writing—it is a work in progress that will get better!



There are other “works in progress.” A writing conference that three colleagues and I hosted in February produced three more schools interested in establishing writing centers. Alice Snyder, a teacher at Hollister (MO) High School, represents one of those schools. She reports that she has written and submitted a proposal for a writing center, and it is steadily gaining support. One of her main obstacles has been the total restructuring of the school’s English department, which she chooses to see as an opportunity to put the writing center “at the heart and center of all our planning.” Her goal remains to open the writing center next fall, so she and I have tentatively planned a training workshop at C of O in May for her future staffers.

My goal now is to continue to offer encouragement and support to these nascent programs and their directors. Multiple writing centers can only improve the quality of education for students in the local schools, where the annual turnover rate can be as high as forty percent. Many of these transient students transfer from one area school to another; after graduating, a number eventually enroll here, at C of O. If a writing center can provide consistency from one school to another, then the entire community benefits. ♦

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## GIVING VOICE (CONT.)

(Continued from page 5)

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# TUTOR'S COLUMN

## THE PODCAST PRODUCERS: A GUIDE TO REALLY USEFUL KNOWLEDGE PODCASTS

◆ *Brooke Cosby and Danielle Melissovas Thompson*  
*Columbus State University*  
*Columbus, GA*

In her article in this issue (pages 1-5), Noreen Lape references Marilyn Cooper's idea that "tutors are often the recipients of special knowledge about the teaching and learning of writing": really useful knowledge. Dr. Lape discusses using podcasts to share this special knowledge. As tutors in Dr. Lape's Writing Center and producers of the podcasts she discusses, we have found that our discoveries about podcasting give us insight into the genre we call "Really Useful Knowledge Podcasts." Creating podcasts is a process, much like the writing process, and by using the tools and insights presented in this article, tutors can transition from being recipients of "Really Useful Knowledge" to being a broadcasters (or podcasters) of it.

Before knowledge can be shared, there needs to be a safe platform for knowledge to be created. In this space, you must feel free to air your concerns and engage in open and honest dialogue about your experiences. Writers must feel they are taken seriously by their peers and professors, and you as tutors must be aware of the really useful knowledge you gain through ongoing discussions with students. Nancy Sommers's visit to our writing center to discuss written feedback provided students with a safe platform and reminded tutors to provide it for students, too. It was as if a professor had made an appointment with students, rather than the other way around. She wanted to seek our advice and hear our concerns, and it was refreshing. Your writing center does not need a guest professor to generate the same space; directors can also create a safe forum for tutors and students to speak out.

Once a writing center has a safe platform for expression, you can then use podcasting as a tool to share the really useful knowledge you discover. But which topics do you choose to turn into podcasts that are relevant for your campus? For us, our first podcast was "The Manifesto," which evolved from our meeting with Nancy, but then we continued to brainstorm with tutors and students, and from their voices—their concerns and conversations—came ideas for other podcasts. Essentially, you have to undertake research in your writing center and your school to find what you need to say. For example, one of our recent podcasts, "Assignments: Mindful or Mindless," came about because our writers and tutors constantly talk about what makes good and bad assignments. Any podcast should be rooted in carefully chosen, well-developed content; we find this content through dialogue with others.

We discovered that podcasting could preserve and strengthen the radical and emphatic voice of students who were asking for something from their teachers. Specifically, we found an emerging pattern of disconnection between students and teachers, ranging from tangible differences in the way students and professors talk about writing assignments to less obvious distinctions in what teachers and students expect in the grading process. We observed that often teachers assumed students would not care about receiving feedback on papers, though we knew that many students do in fact value the care put into helpful feedback. Many of our podcasts were created for a dual audience, spotlighting disconnection between students and professors so that they can hear the disconnection for themselves. These podcasts juxtapose voices and beckon audiences to listen instead of judge (See "Writing in the Sciences"). Wouldn't it be great to sit down with students and professors and say, "Okay, here's what Student isn't grasping, and Teacher, here are some ways to help him understand it." The ultimate goal is to encourage reflection and thus initiate dialogue that otherwise might not occur between students and instructors.

Of course, when you are responsible for communicating this kind of knowledge, you must be mindful of how information is conveyed. In our podcasts, we are careful not to cross a line and polarize the two audiences. We try to maintain our role as non-judgmental arbiters by asking general, non-threatening, open-ended questions, avoiding too much interference, and conveying a passive, interview-like tone. In our podcast "Writing in the Sciences" we asked science professors and upper-level science majors, separately, to explain the discourse conventions of science writing. The professor explained theoretical purposes behind the conventions of the discourse, while the students conveyed the formal steps of writing lab reports. This podcast and others like it were engineered to feature students first, followed by professors, with minimal narration or manipulation so the audience can hear the unity or disconnection of the voices and come to their own conclusions. Remember

that you are focused on content in a documentary-like way. You have to be truthful to your subject—the individuals who appear on camera. Both students and professors can feel vulnerable when sharing on camera, so provide a safe, reassuring atmosphere.

Consider that sometimes the podcast's message may critique audience members, so it is important to shoot and edit using techniques such as humor to prevent your audience from taking offense. Do not shoot or edit in such a way as to put your audience on the defensive. In "The Manifesto," we did not want to come across as insulting to professors but still wanted to send a powerful message. "The Manifesto" discusses potentially controversial material without taking aim at anyone in particular; everyone deserves to be portrayed with dignity and respect, no matter what the podcast is about. Humor can help deliver serious content in an approachable way. A famous writer once said, "If you want to tell people the truth, you had better make them laugh; otherwise they'll kill you." In our experience, spoofs are like the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. In "Assignments: Mindful or Mindless?" we used the memorable sound effect from *Law and Order* to signal the start of our own investigation. The audience gets the message, but does not feel threatened. You can show a respect for human error, even while trying to correct it.

It's also important to consider how to present audio-visual podcasts in particular, especially since there are so many options involved and so much more sensory information that can sway an audience. While filming, even angles you use will make a difference. "The Manifesto" uses a series of medium to close shots, depending on the delivery and personality of each speaker. Angling up creates a sense of power and authority, while close shots create intimacy and vulnerability. In the editing process, consider opening/introduction sequences, transitions, and music. Any editing can be as basic or intricate as you wish it to be, but everything added to raw footage does affect the tone of that footage in some way. Again "The Manifesto" is a great example. We chose red as a color of power and change, and we chose music that commands attention, if not respect. We wanted to be very serious with "The Manifesto," but even as we did so, our scrolling text homage to *Star Wars* adds subtle humor.

As is true with writing, making a podcast is a recursive process. Revisions are made easy by simple video editing programs like Windows Movie Maker or iMovie, which present a variety of choices. However, you do not want your editing to be distracting or to bury your content. While revising our podcast, "Assignments: Mindful or Mindless?" we thought about using circus music, but as we arranged the footage to watch the narrative unfold, we quickly changed our minds and forfeited music altogether because the implications might have trivialized the message or the persons. Think of editing as packaging what is said; editing is meant to clean up your raw footage and make it presentable to others. As with writing, peer feedback and previews with fellow tutors and directors are necessary steps in revising your podcast before publishing.

By the time you have a finished podcast to share with the world, you have brainstormed with students, recorded raw footage or audio, received feedback from peer tutors, and refined your podcast through editing. If you produce a podcast, you will also experience a personal process of growth and advancement in your craft, just as writers do when they go through the writing process to produce a new piece. By understanding podcasting as a process which, like writing, requires self-reflection and a connection with others, you will find it becomes an opportunity for developing and sharing really useful knowledge. When you engage in the writing process you exercise your skills as a writer. When you create a podcast, you reflect on your craft, analyze problems you face, and ultimately grow as a tutor. ♦

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## CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

**October 10, 2009:** Northeast Ohio Writing Centers Association, in Wooster, OH

**Contact:** Bill Macauley: [wmacauley@wooster.edu](mailto:wmacauley@wooster.edu): 330-263-2372. Conference website: [http://fpdc.kent.edu/regionalcenter/lc\\_0607/w\\_matters/index.html](http://fpdc.kent.edu/regionalcenter/lc_0607/w_matters/index.html).



**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@usiouxfalls.edu](mailto:greg.dyer@usiouxfalls.edu)). Conference website: <http://pages.usiouxfalls.edu/mwca/mwca09/>.

**April 8-10, 2010:** East Central Writing Centers Association, in Lansing, MI

**Contact:** E-mail [ecwca2010questions@gmail.com](mailto:ecwca2010questions@gmail.com); conference website: <http://writing.msu.edu/ecwca>.



**April 9-10, 2010:** Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Newark, DE

**Contact:** Melissa Ianetta and Barbara Gaal Lutz ([lutz@english.udel.edu](mailto:lutz@english.udel.edu)). E-mail: [MAWCAconference2010@english.udel.edu](mailto:MAWCAconference2010@english.udel.edu).

**May 25-28, 2010:** European Writing Centers Association, in Paris, France

Contact: Ann Mott: [amott@aup.fr](mailto:amott@aup.fr). EWCA website: <http://ewca.sabanciuniv.edu/eng/>.



**November 3-6, 2010.** International Writing Centers Association, in Baltimore, MD

**Contact:** Barb Lutz and John Nordlof. E-mail: [IWCAconference2010@english.udel.edu](mailto:IWCAconference2010@english.udel.edu).