

THE WRITING LAB

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

Volume 35, Number 3/4

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

Nov./Dec., 2010

— FROM THE EDITOR —

Two articles in this issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* ask us to expand our thinking as we expand our online presence. Sharon Estes and Alexis Martina share their approach to training tutors online by creating modules for tutors to study, and Jacke Grutsch McKinney takes a close look at what Twitter is, how it's used by writing centers, and how it can be used in ways aligned to writing center pedagogy.

Two other articles focus on issues in tutoring writing that continue to prompt discussion. Gayla Mills offers tutors suggestions for tutoring in various emotional settings while Kristin Boyd and Ann Halbeck study the ways they move between directive and nondirective tutoring as they work with student writers.

As previously announced, *WLN* has moved to being a bi-monthly publication, a change that will ensure the publication remains on solid ground. But if your mail delivery of *WLN* issues is like mine, transit time seems to have increased considerably. From my vantage point, bulk mail deliveries of issues seem to spend weeks in the mail, more than in previous years (though that depends on how mail is routed and delivered in your area). But as long as you keep sending articles that inform and challenge the rest of us and reviewers continue to assist with the process, *WLN* will (eventually) appear in your mail boxes.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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TAKING TUTOR TRAINING ONLINE

◆ Sharon Estes and Alexis Martina
*Ohio State University
Columbus, OH*

As graduate student administrators and former tutors at The Ohio State University's Writing Center, we take seriously the task of providing ongoing professional support and training to our staff. We utilize observations and weekly staff meetings to help our tutors continue to improve their skills and gain a more nuanced understanding of their roles. Because our tutors often respond best to professional development activities in which they play a part, our weekly staff meetings are sometimes led by tutors on topics that interest them and that they have identified as important to our center's mission.

However, like all administrators who work with large groups of staff members, we face a number of challenges in offering training that goes beyond our required weekly one-hour group meetings. Our staff is composed entirely of students with class and/or teaching obligations that sometimes compel them to miss meetings or workshops that are not built into their weekly schedules. While individual tutors occasionally have "down time" when a scheduled client does not attend an appointment, there is no way to anticipate when this will happen in order to schedule a training event for that time. Also, even when we are able to set aside time for a training event, our staff members have varying degrees of previous experience, both with tutoring writing and with the various

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Manuscripts: Before sending in submissions, please consult the guidelines on the *WLN* website. Recommended length for articles is approximately 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutors' Column essays, in MLA format. Please send as attached files in an e-mail to submission@writinglabnewsletter.org.

academic genres and disciplines they may encounter, so a particular training activity rarely is equally useful to everyone.

In seeking to develop a mechanism for training that was both efficient and effective, we went online, creating a training system that was portable (that tutors would be able to access any time and anywhere), flexible, and highly adaptable. For seven years, Ohio State's writing center had offered the convenience and flexibility of online learning to our clients, through our online writing lab, with great success; taking staff training online seemed like a logical solution to our problems with scheduling and our tutors' varying degrees of experience. The system we created consists of a series of online self-guided training modules on various tutoring-related topics. Each module contains a compilation of materials, including links to articles, excerpts from sample tutoring sessions, mini-quizzes or interactive elements, and questions for discussion or reflection. Tutors can work on the modules anywhere—at the center or at home—whenever they have free time. We have also given tutors the opportunity to contribute new materials to the modules, which allows tutors to become active participants in designing their own training experiences. The structure of this training system is flexible enough to meet the often very different needs of staff members; it allows them to seek training in particular areas as questions or interests emerge, and it gives them opportunities to discuss and reflect on the things they learn.

IMPLEMENTING A THEORETICAL MODEL FOR ONLINE TUTOR TRAINING

The online model was ideal for our center, not only because it is flexible enough to coordinate with our constraints on scheduling, but also because our center is specifically interested in exploring new ways of incorporating technology into our services and mission. Our training system also gives tutors a voice in the creation and implementation of training. Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann's *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction* argues for the importance of "principle-centered" training for writing instructors teaching online (5). Our online training system follows this theoretical stance; it is based on the principles of individualization, reflectivity, interactivity, and recursiveness, enabling it to meet the needs of individual tutors, allow tutors to reflect on their practice in order to create their own theories of tutoring, engage clients' diverse learning styles, and evolve to address emerging issues in the writing center. Our principles indicate both the benefits our new training system provides tutors and the ways in which it promotes the maintenance of a dynamic professional environment that is responsive to the changing needs of the Center.

INDIVIDUALIZATION

Practically, our online system allows tutors to work independently to continue their training. Located at a secure online site, our modules include several topics that are related to specific tutoring skills, including "Personal Interaction," "Setting an Agenda," and "Directiveness in Tutoring." Other modules are more content-based, focusing on the principles and strategies used to tutor clients in specific fields or with particular needs.

Tutors work through the modules alone, concentrating on only those they have either identified as areas of interest or been assigned to by administrators. The modules require that tutors first identify, and then reflect on, their tutoring practices. Each module is divided into four components: reading, dialogue, evaluation, and reflection. The reading section includes a range of recent articles, excerpts from tutoring guides, and original text devoted to the topic. The dialogue section includes excerpts from (fictitious) tutoring sessions displayed on video, each with a short introductory and interpretive section. The evaluation section includes a short quiz over the material covered, the results of which are sent to the writing center administrator, and the reflection section offers an opportunity to post a more personal response to the topic on a blog available to administrators and other participants in

the module. Each module is designed to take between one and two hours to complete. By the end of each module, the tutor has moved from reflection to concrete strategies, which can be incorporated into tutorials.

This system is also individualized because it allows us to tailor additional training exercises to a particular tutor's strengths and weaknesses, and the exercises can be completed in any order, according to each tutor's needs. Administrators conduct regular observations of staff using an observation form designed to reflect current modules, and at the end of each observation we select at least one module that the tutor must complete. After several rounds of observation, tutors will have assembled a kind of individualized educational program that reflects their own interests and needs. Additionally, tutors can choose to complete a module to learn more about a particular topic whenever they want additional training. Experienced staff members can seek out training modules that interest them or even participate in the process of suggesting or generating new ones for the benefit of newer tutors. In these ways, we ensure that each tutor engages in a course of continued training that will reflect his or her experiences, interests, and previous levels of training.

REFLECTIVITY AND INTERACTIVITY

The principle of interactivity is crucial to our system because we want tutors to realize that they are joining in ongoing conversations with other tutors, administrators, and members of the writing center community. Our modules not only invite individual reflection, but also create contexts in which that reflection becomes part of a larger conversation. We include current articles on the reading sections of the modules to promote this idea of a real-time community. As stated above, each module includes an entire section devoted to various non-evaluative questions, the answers to which are posted on a community blog. In requiring tutors to share their reflections with more experienced tutors and writing center coordinators, the reflection process becomes a discussion that, in turn, leads to even more thoughtful reflection.

Thomas, DeVoss, and Hara point out that allowing people to interact in an online space allows them "a platform... a place for them to enter academic conversations, an opportunity for them to showcase their potential" (84). Our online interactive system fosters a sense of community among tutors that excites them, which, in turn, makes them more willing to contribute. Ideally, we will eventually share our modules with writing centers across the country, creating a vast and dynamic storehouse of training materials.

RECURSIVENESS

In practice, some of our theoretical principles can blend together. As described in the section on interactivity, the structure of the modules is such that it invites new contributions and content, creating a recursive situation. We foster this kind of ongoing creation by assigning experienced tutors to lead specific modules and giving them the freedom to adapt, update, or rotate through new materials, including new articles, new dialogues, and new reflection questions, as well as to respond to any new postings on the reflection blogs. On another level, tutors can interact with the modules, creating ongoing conversations by selecting which modules to complete or contributing material to existing modules through associated blogs or places where participants can suggest additional readings. We see this kind of interaction as one that will only benefit the center: "tutors can make theory more accessible to other tutors" (Dintz and Diedaisch 74). Our modules are in flux from one quarter to the next as they are adapted to the specific and changing needs of the tutor or the center.

“Just as moving online has changed the ways that writing centers serve clients, so would online training systems open up new possibilities for the ways in which tutor training is carried out.”

NEWS

MENEWCA EXTENDS ABSTRACT SUBMISSION DEADLINE

The Middle East North Africa Writing Centers Alliance will be meeting on Feb. 17-18, 2011, in Dubai, UAE at the American University of Sharjah. Their original deadline for abstract submissions has been extended from Nov. 1 to Dec. 1. For further information, contact Maria Elftheriou (melftheriou@aus.edu). Conference website is <<http://menewca.org/13.html>>.

Because we have not yet shared our resources with other centers, we have not yet seen the kind of “big-picture” recursiveness (among writing center administrators, tutors, universities, etc.) we envision for it. However, we are encouraged by the enthusiasm with which our tutors have begun to discuss issues raised by the modules and to collaborate on creating new content for additional modules. Tutors print out and bring their texts, reflections, and evaluations from each module to these conversations. Most recently, a group of tutors interested in tutoring ESL clients decided to create a training module on ESL/EFL that would better reflect the needs of the ESL population we serve most often at our writing center. We hope our training modules will provide space for individual thinking and reflection that will become the basis of these types of collaborations between tutors, and between tutors and administrators. In this way, reflexivity will allow the online training system to remain relevant.

INITIAL RESULTS

After presenting our modules to the staff at our annual pre-employment training, we set our tutors to work testing and evaluating them. During the first school term we conducted individual observations of tutors. Based on the results of those observations, we assigned each tutor a module to complete. Before beginning the module, tutors filled out a form indicating their current feelings toward whatever specific area their assigned module would cover. Upon completion of the module, tutors filled out an evaluation of the module, reporting what was most helpful to them and making suggestions for further development of the modules.

The comments from these evaluations were quite instructive to us, in that they indicated that we are headed in a good direction but can make some changes to make the experience even more productive and rewarding for tutors. Respondents accorded a large part of the success of the modules to the online location. One tutor commented, “I think the modules would be less effective if they were just a binder full of essays and handouts.” Another wrote, “I like being able to access the module from anywhere, at any time.” Additionally, tutors felt that even if they already had experience with a particular aspect of tutoring, it was still beneficial for them to complete the module. One veteran tutor stated, “Even though this is a topic I’m familiar with, I still felt like I learned a lot.” Other tutors appreciated being able to have concrete tasks to complete while they were waiting for clients or when clients missed appointments.

What we learned: More time needed—we didn’t allow tutors to take themselves off the schedule ahead of time because we assumed they would do the modules when they had free appointment slots or no-shows. Fortunately for the Center, but unfortunately for our plan, we had an increase in appointments, which did not give tutors any time to work on the modules. We ended up having to schedule people off at the end of the quarter in order to give them time to complete the modules and get us feedback. Although our modules currently exist online, their content is primarily delivered through Microsoft Word documents. Tutor evaluations indicated that tutors would like more interactive elements in the content of the modules themselves, such as video and audio files. One tutor suggested including “some sort of mock tutorial where we have to come up with the correct answers would be really useful . . . I think it would be more effective for us to answer direct questions, do some sort of mock tutorial, and get directive feedback.”

The most exciting aspect of the online training module system has been tutors’ willingness to create new content for not only the existing modules, but also for new modules for which they identify a need. We had a group of three tutors work together on a long-term project to create a training module on tutoring clients in business writing. Each of them already had experience with different

arenas of professional communication, and they created a module whose structure capitalized on their specialized knowledge. This group unveiled their module at a weekly staff meeting to rave reviews, and the business writing module remains one of our most popular training resources. Thus, we have ultimately found that the interactive online training model encourages what Stuart Blythe terms a substantive view of technology, which holds that technology will change the ways in which humans interact in certain environments. And this has certainly proved true with our tutors, who complete the modules, engage with the content, and add to the system.

CONCLUSION: ONLINE TRAINING MODULES 2.0

The multi-modal structure of our training system allows us to combine elements that appeal to a variety of learning and discourse styles, bringing together academic research, video of tutoring sessions, and interactive activities. This creates the possibility that the modules will work well for a wide variety of participants, participants as varied as the tutoring staffs of many university writing centers, and it is also particularly appropriate for a training exercise, using the structure of a website to bring together writing center theory with tutoring practice.

Our next iteration of the module system will be an interactive wiki where tutors can create content and respond to already-existing modules. We plan to open this wiki to writing centers across the nation in the hopes that large-scale collaboration will enable the creation of a permanent yet fluid resource. Just as moving online has changed the ways that writing centers serve clients, so would online training systems open up new possibilities for the ways in which tutor training is carried out. Tutor training takes the form of an ongoing conversation, punctuated by practice and reflection, which leads back to more focused tutor training. Online tutor training will provide the larger writing center community yet another important tool through which we continue to offer the highest quality of service to our clients. ♦

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TAKE NOTE

ROCKY MOUNTAIN PEER TUTORING CONFERENCE

Call for Proposals
April 1-2, 2011
Westminster College
Salt Lake City, Utah
"Writing Centers Come of Age"

The 2011 Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference invites peer tutors to submit proposals for papers, workshops, and poster presentations that focus on this "coming of age" process. Rather than demonstrations of local practices, we encourage submissions informed by research and an awareness of writing center theory. Submit proposals online at <www.westminstercollege.edu/rmptc/proposal>. More information at <<https://www.westminstercollege.edu/rmptc>>. Submission Deadline: January 14, 2011.

GEEK IN THE CENTER

TWITTER

◆ Jackie Grutsch McKinney
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Muncie, IN

Ours is a divided world. On the one side are Twitter users happily and rapidly discoursing their lives on laptops and cell phones 140 characters at a time, and on the other are those who say with disgust or mere disdain, as if the very words themselves are sour, “I’ve never even been on Twitter.” If one of these sides is growing, it probably is still the former. As of June 2010, 190 million monthly users contributed to the 65 million tweets posted each day (Schonfeld). A PEW Research study from July 2010 reveals that 85% of American adults, young and old, know what Twitter is even if they do not use it (“Political”). This month’s column explores the present and potential uses of Twitter for writing centers if not to convert non-users into users, at least to point to possibilities and soften the gap between us.

TWITTER BASICS

Twitter, launched in 2006, is a microblogging platform. Users create accounts and post 140-character responses to the prompt “What’s happening?” on their profile pages on Twitter.com or by various other means. As illustrated in Figure 1, there are many ways to post to your Twitter account and for readers to access your posts without interfacing with Twitter.com at all. One of these, the ability for users to post and read Twitter posts via text message (SMS), has proved to be revolutionary because it allows anyone from protesters in Iran to conference goers in Indiana to broadcast events as they unfold through nothing more than a phone that can send a text message.¹

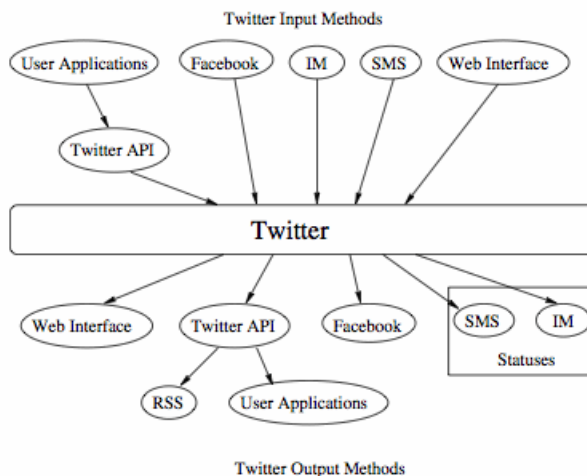


Fig. 1: Diagram of Twitter input and output (from Krishnamurthy, Gill, and Arlitt 20).

Posts (also called “tweets”) are public by default and can be read by anyone unless a user marks an account as protected. In this way, Twitter is different from Facebook, where posts (called status updates) are, given the right privacy settings, only semi-public; they can be seen only by my friends who I have agreed can see my posts. On Twitter, public is really public. Readers do not need your permission to read your posts and do not even have to be users themselves. Your posts can be found through Twitter searches and even in Google search results. Further, in April 2010, the Library of Congress announced they will store a digital archive of every public tweet posted since Twitter’s inception (Raymond).

The public nature of Twitter might give individuals and writing centers looking to use Twitter pause. However, even with hundreds of millions of users, Twitter isn't exactly a mouthpiece to the masses. Many millions are all tweeting at once, so the resulting noise can just seem, well, noisy. In order to know you are being heard, you need followers. When other users follow you, your posts show up on their feeds, sort of like a newspaper subscription. Followers are your subscribers; you are not sure that they read everything you write, but at least you know your writing is delivered to them. To get followers, you must post regularly, you must have posts that folks want to read, and you should follow others. You can find people to follow in several ways. By clicking on the "find people" text link on the top of your home page, you'll be able to search for words or names, you can browse interests, you can see whom Twitter suggests, or Twitter can find folks you know through your e-mail contact list.

When you start to follow others, their posts show up on your home page. You'll notice that Twitter has its own semiotics as users try to take full advantage of the 140 allotted characters. In Twitter, anything preceded by a hashtag (#) is called a tag. Tags, also common in blogging and social bookmarking, are a way to designate a category for the post. Users will use tags to label posts about a particular topic. With 65-million tweets broadcast each day, having tags makes for easier searching. For example, the 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication used the tag #CCCC10; users were able to search for this tag and follow conference happenings easily. Tags usually appear at the end of posts.

User posts also frequently include URLs that link to more content. Often, posts comment on the linked material (an article, a photo, a video), so the posts only makes sense by following the links. Users take advantage of web apps that provide shortened URLs (such as is.gd, bit.ly, ow.ly, and goo.gl) to save characters, though if the address is short enough, there is no reason why you can't post the original. As I work on this column, Twitter is in the process of unrolling a "new Twitter" which will allow some content like images and videos to be viewed directly in the feed.

But posting and reading posts is only the start of Twitter; what keeps most people coming back is the communication it enables. Over the years, I have met many people who try Twitter—they sign on, they post a little, they follow a few people, they watch the public timeline—but then lose interest. Surely, Twitter is not for everyone, but I think many beginners do not have the same experience as long-term users or "power" users because they do not participate in Twitter's interactivity. Power users typically communicate with others as often as they broadcast their own feed; that is, they read and respond as often as they write. When your Twitter feed becomes a conversation, it is much more interesting than just a static stream of posts.

Ways of communicating on Twitter include replying, direct messages, and retweeting. When you see others' posts that you want to respond to, you click "reply." Your reply is public; it shows up on your feed and the feed of the person you respond to. These posts will be recognizable because they will start with the @ symbol followed by the username of the person you are responding to. You are also able to send a private message, called a "direct message," to another user. These messages do not show up on feeds or search results. On the right side of your Twitter.com profile page there is a link for creating and viewing your direct messages. These messages are also limited to 140 characters and can function as a sort of a non-instant message, an asynchronous chat. If you want to share someone else's post with your own followers, you can click on "retweet." These posts are recognizable because they either begin with RT@ username (indicating the originating writer of the post) or because they have a grey double arrow box at the start of the post and state "retweeted by" at the end of the post. Retweeting is the means for Twitter users to curate the noise, to pull out and recognize those posts that seem significant, those things that seem worth repeating.

TWITTER FOR WRITING CENTERS

For me, the value of Twitter for the individual user is in the interactivity, which begs the question: what is the value of Twitter for a group or organization like a writing center? A search of Twitter profiles finds around eighty "writ-

TAKE NOTE

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Call for Proposals

Feb. 26, 2011

Riverside City College

Riverside, CA

“The Lay of The Land: Surveying Writing Center Geography”

We ask participants to consider the geography of writing centers, provoking literal and metaphorical questions about the relationships between writing center spaces (physical, institutional, ideological, theoretical) and the people within (and outside of) them.

Proposal Guidelines. Deadline: November 30th, 2010. Please include:

- Title
- Topic/Question you would like to explore/ Goal for your session
- How you will generate discussion in your session
- 250 words
- Because this is a workshop, please present anything you would like other participants to see in the form of a handout you will provide. Please bring 40 copies to share.

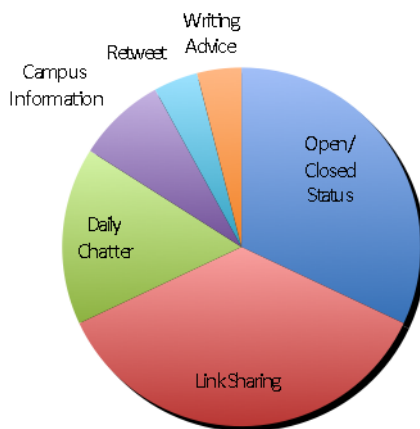
For information on how to submit proposals, please visit <www.socialwritingcenters.org/>. For other questions, please contact the Conference Coordinator, Denise Kruiuzenga-Muro, at Denise.Kruiuzenga-Muro@rcc.edu.

Registration fees: \$20 per student, \$25 per director, payable to SoCal WCA, Mail to: Corrine Hinton
Learning Enhancement Center
University of La Verne
1950 Third Street
La Verne, CA 91750

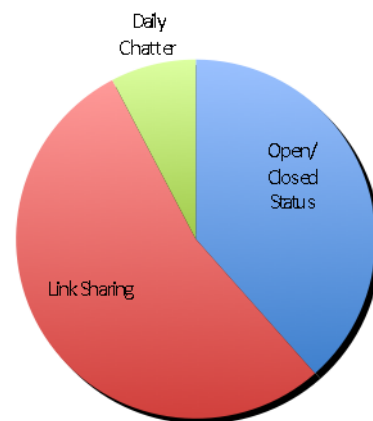
ing center” and a dozen or so “writing lab” accounts.² To get some sense of how writing centers are using Twitter, I made note of the username, the current post, the number of posts in the previous two weeks, the total number of posts of the user, and the total number of followers for the first twenty-five results to the query “writing center” in the profile search on one day in September 2010. These twenty-five writing centers averaged about 132 posts each, ranging from one post to a center with 833 posts. The centers had, on average, about 220 followers. In the past two weeks, each of these users had posted an average of 2.36 times, ranging from zero posts (for fourteen of the accounts) to thirteen posts. Many of the users had not posted in the last four months (twelve accounts); half of those (six accounts) had not posted in the calendar year 2010.

Next, I looked at what kinds of posts these accounts had.³ The perceived audience of all of the posts seemed to be students or clients of a particular center. Eight of the twenty-five alerted readers about the center being open or closed (e.g. “We are up and running in our new digs! Stop in and check us out!”). Nine posts included a link; six of these links directed readers to their own writing center’s material online. Four could be characterized as “daily chatter,” which, according to Java, Song, Finin, and Tseng, are the most common type of post on Twitter in general (62). Daily chatter includes posts about what a person (or group of people) are doing—something specific that was happening in the center other than just being opened or closed (e.g. “The Writing Center is getting flooded with students. I need some water wings and a few willing tutors.”). Two posts communicated campus-specific information. One post contained writing advice and one was a retweet. None of the posts were reply posts.

Types of Writing Center Tweets, Total Sample [n=25]



Types of Writing Center Tweets, Active Accounts in Sample [n=13]



However, if we look at active users in this sample—those who have posted in the last four months—the variety of posts flattens to just three types: open/closed status, link sharing, and daily chatter. Java et al. characterize Twitter users as information providers, information seekers, or friends. Using this schema, and from this brief analysis, I would suggest that most writing centers users on Twitter see their purpose as information providers: they share site-specific information—the open/closed status and daily chatter—and share links. They are not asking questions or responding to others—the behavior of information seekers or friends. Many of the writing center accounts are followed more than they follow, again suggesting that writing center users want to broadcast more than receive information.

TAKE NOTE

NORTHEAST WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Call for Proposals
 March 12-13, 2011
 Southern New Hampshire University
 Hooksett, NH
 “The Writing Center as Community Garden”
 Keynote speaker: Harry Denny

Like a community garden, much of the work done in the writing center involves similar shared acts of preparing, planting, cultivating and harvesting. Writing centers and community gardens are sites where diverse groups of people devoted to a common cause work together. They create life, through physical effort, education, sharing, volunteerism, and continuous efforts to improve their own processes and products. The theme of this year’s conference provides us with new ways to look at our work through this metaphor and framework.

We enthusiastically call for tutors, administrators, and students of writing centers to explore the metaphor of the community garden and its connection to writing centers, including the seeds we plant; the growth we nurture; the pests we control; the benefits we reap; and the transformations we see. We invite proposals for workshops, roundtable discussions, and panel presentations. To view the full CFP, visit our new website: <<http://www.northeastwca.org>>.

Submit your proposal by December 1, 2010, electronically to the chair of the NEWCA Proposal Reading Committee, Kathryn Nielsen-Dube, at NielsenDubeK@Merrimack.edu.

For other questions related to the conference, e-mail the NEWCA chair, Kerry Rourke, at krouke@babson.edu.

Important questions, ones I wasn’t able to answer in this mini-study of writing center Twitter use, are about goals and effectiveness: what do writing centers want to do with Twitter? And, are they achieving that? Knowing the answer to those questions would allow us to evaluate the current use. For instance, I was surprised by the degree that most writing center accounts provide information rather than engage in conversation or seek information; it seemed so un-writing center-like. Of course, Twitter is a simple, powerful tool that can help centers reach various ends. The key, as with so many tools, is to know why we do what we do so that we can judge if we’ve done what we had hoped to. That said, this small glimpse at writing center Twitter behavior revealed to me my own complicity with promoting posting over conversation. We’ve had an account for a couple of years in the writing center I direct, and I’ve encouraged desk tutors to post, but I haven’t asked tutors to read and respond to our followers. We haven’t made a great effort to follow members of our university or others engaging in the teaching of writing. I will revise our procedures accordingly and also encourage tutors who post to ask more questions and see what we can learn from the crowd.

One last note on writing center behavior on Twitter: writing centers follow one another. Doing so, they watch (and learn) what other centers are doing with Twitter. Though I’m apt to suggest at this point that this might normalize behavior—active accounts were mostly doing the same sorts of posts—the possibility is there for us to share with, seek out, and inform one another in new and exciting ways.



¹API means application programming interface. It is the way that programs talk to one another. So a user can use a program like Tweetdeck which will “talk to” Twitter to post your tweets and show you the tweets of those you follow; Tweetdeck is using the Twitter API to do this. SMS means short message service. It is the service that enables text messaging. Any phone that can text message can be set up to post directly to Twitter. Each individual user on Twitter also has an RSS (or real simple syndication) feed. This means I can get updates from users not only by following through the Twitter interface, but I could add the user’s feed to my RSS reader (like Google Reader) and get updates there.

²The searching is not precise as writing centers can be called many different things, as we know, and because the profile search scans the name and bio listed on profiles. If a center uses an acronym here or otherwise does not identify as a “writing center” or “writing lab,” I would not have seen it in these search results.

³Though some of these posts might have fallen into more than one category, I have assigned each post to just one.



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PREPARING FOR EMOTIONAL SESSIONS

◆ *Gayla Mills*
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When a writer walks through the door, paper in hand, it's easy for the words on the page to become the focus of our attention. There's a clear intellectual task at hand—to quickly triage the “problems” of the paper and determine which ones to address and how best to tackle them. This can be exciting, challenging work. The problem is that writers don't visit merely for academic help. For some, deciding to “be tutored” is not simply scheduling time in a busy day before turning in a paper. It's an act of will that engages the stomach and the heart—the stomach, which is churning with uncertainty and fear, and the heart, which is hopeful that the paper conveys something true. Not all students, of course, bring their body parts to the session. For some, having a tutor look at their paper is just that—a checkbox on the list of tasks to complete an assignment. But what about for the others, the ones who drag their emotions through the door? Some emotions, of course, can enrich a session. An engaged writer can bring enthusiasm and energy to the paper, and both writer and tutor can feed off that excitement as they work together. But a tutor, especially a new one, can be thrown off balance when confronted with an emotionally distraught writer. We can't respond perfectly to every emotional situation, but we can mentally prepare. We can recall how we felt when struggling with our own writing, listen to the advice of other tutors and teachers, research the basics of handling emotional challenges, and discuss various approaches we might take.

BEING EVALUATED

As new tutors gain confidence, they sometimes forget the fear students may feel in being evaluated—both by their professors and by the tutor in front of them. Last semester, when I was leading a workshop for struggling students on how to improve their writing, one freshman described problems she'd had with feedback on her first paper in English comp.

“The professor wrote that I shouldn't write like I speak,” she said. “She thinks what I wrote was stupid.” This young woman in our small group was about to cry, and I thought she needed both reassurance and a steady hand.

“I'm sure she didn't mean anything personal by it. She might not even know how you speak,” I replied. “But teachers sometimes say ‘don't write like you talk’ when they mean that you're writing too casually. You might need to write your papers using a more formal, academic style.”

“Oh, is that all? I can do that,” the student said, looking relieved. Suddenly her task was a manageable one. It didn't include changing the way she talked, impressing the professor, proving she was smart enough to be in college, or other intangible, hard-to-achieve goals. She just had to make her papers more formal. In clarifying what the professor meant, I also helped the writer see evaluation of her writing in less emotional terms. Student writers face the constant pressure of having their work evaluated. Professors have the task of teaching students, a responsibility that requires them not only to instruct, but also to critique. The best ones do so with respect and skill. Unfortunately, some teach in a manner that students find confusing, unclear, or, at its worst, arbitrarily dictatorial. These are not optimum circumstances for fine work or a discussion of the nuances of good style. Sometimes the anxiety of being judged dominates a writer's thinking and interferes with writing and revising. A student may fear to face yet another perceived judge (the tutor) and have trouble listening to suggestions. As teachers and as tutors, we should remind ourselves why writing can be so difficult and remember how vulnerable and sensitive our visiting writers can be.

WHEN THE PAPER IS PERSONAL

Dealing with distraught writers is more complex when the writing touches on something personal. Students may write about childhood or teenage trauma, religious uncertainties, family secrets, or questions of racial, gender, or cultural identity. How should a tutor address the contents of a paper when the writing reveals the secrets, confusions, and anxieties of the writer?

Tracy Hudson takes a firm stand in her *WLN* article, as clearly revealed in her title: “Head ‘Em Off at the Pass: Strategies for Handling Emotionalism in the Writing Center.” The tutor should steer the writer away from “simmering emotions,” she argues, saying that “By remaining professional and detached, the tutor has a better chance of avoiding unwanted emotionalism in the session” (11). Since

the act of writing often involves delving into passionate feelings, she believes, it's unsurprising that writers will bring in work that sparks their feelings. But, Hudson says, a tutor's primary goal is writing improvement: "Head off any attempts to engage in personal counseling or relationships" (12). Although her approach may sometimes work, avoiding emotions altogether is often both inhumane and ineffective. In "Tutoring in Emotionally Charged Sessions," Agnostinelli, Poch, and Santoro note that there is little practical information written for tutors about how to address the emotional side of writing. As they say, "The literature about tutoring tends to focus mostly on the 'brain,' leaving out the 'heart'" (17). Generally speaking, they advise "focus and firmness" (18). The problem with emotions, they argue, is that they cloud judgment and rationality. Developing a clear goal for the session can provide distance from delicate subject matter. This allows the writer to skirt around how he or she feels, and gives the tutor time to decide if he or she is ready to give emotional support.

This approach doesn't completely ignore the emotional underpinnings of the session but rather seeks to control them. Specifically, Agnostinelli et al. suggest that the tutor begins by acknowledging the difficulty of discussing a personal experience: "Human beings need to hear that they are being listened to and understood; taking a few minutes to empathize will establish a degree of trust" (19). But the tutor should then return focus back to the words on the page and the goals the writer seeks to achieve. One problem with this approach is that it assumes a writer can't be both emotional and rational about his work. Yet some of our best writing comes from a position of intense feeling. It's true, however, that the process of editing works best when that feeling has been set aside and our analytic tools come to the fore. Whether a tutor helps a writer draw on his more intense feelings or shift to a more analytic focus will depend, in part, on the stage of the paper.

In "Personal Revelations in the Tutoring Session," Jane Honigs describes a session where a writer had been asked to incorporate a personal experience into a research paper, and she had chosen examples from her abused childhood (9). Though Honigs had been advised to ignore emotional encounters in a session, she addressed the subject of abuse head on. She felt it would be a mistake to ignore these revelations, as the students in the writer's class had done. The author was relieved to briefly discuss her difficulties and could then develop her thesis statement and make further revisions during the session. In this case, giving the writer a chance to talk directly about the source of her distress—her abuse as a child—laid the foundation for the more technical conversation that followed. But, Honigs points out, tutors must approach each emotional situation differently: "Some students don't want your sympathy; they just want help with their writing. They'll let you know if they need some personal attention, but don't fall into the trap of being overly supportive" (9). You may open the door to give a writer a chance to explore her ideas, but let her decide if she wants to walk through it.

GUYS, GALS, AND TEARS

What happens if a writer starts to cry during a session? How comfortable you feel in responding may come down to gender: women are more likely to cry in public, and may find it easier to react to someone else's tears. But whether tutors agree with these generalities or not, discussing the topic can reduce the element of surprise, thus making it easier to respond effectively. On our writing center message board, Ray wrote about his first encounter with a sobbing student. He began, "We spent the first 40 minutes talking about the writing prompt. It took that long because she was a little out of it; she was crying and having a really hard time concentrating." Ray was frustrated that her emotions were interfering with what he perceived as his task: improving her writing. Where did her feelings fit in the session? How should he react to a weeping girl? This wasn't what he signed up for when he decided to be a tutor. "If she would've stayed focused on the paper, I think it would've been better," he says. "She got nothing out of the session. She wasn't a better writer at the end of it."

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Assoc. or Full Prof. of Rhetoric and Composition/ Writing Center Director Northeastern University

The English Department of Northeastern U. invites applications for a Rhetoric and Composition specialist at the tenured rank of associate or full professor, starting Fall 2011. Writing center scholarship is highly desirable; secondary research interests open; ESL/ELL, new media, or cultural rhetorics are especially welcome. The Director of the Writing Center will provide leadership for our growing center staffed by graduate student and peer consultants (see <http://www.english.neu.edu/writingcenter/>). Course load for research-active faculty is 2/2; the Director position carries an administrative course release.

The successful candidate will have a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition or a related field, a strong record of scholarly publication and an active research agenda, and experience as a successful Writing Program Administrator. The position requires a commitment to working with culturally and linguistically diverse students in an urban institution with strong emphases on global research and experiential learning. Northeastern University is an Affirmative Action, Title IX, Equal Opportunity Employer. Northeastern particularly welcomes applications from minorities, women, and persons with disabilities.

Learn more about the English Department (<www.english.neu.edu/>) and our Writing Program (<http://www.english.neu.edu/writingprogram>). For further information contact Chris Gallagher, Writing Program Director, at 617-373-2193. Review of applications began on Nov. 1 and will continue until the position is filled. To apply, visit the College of Social Sciences and Humanities website at <www.northeastern.edu/cssh> and click on Faculty Positions.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Director, Reading Writing Center Florida State University

The Florida State U. English Department invites applications for the Directorship of its Reading Writing Center (RWC), beginning in summer or fall 2011. The Directorship is a 12-month continuing, non-tenure-earning position eligible for promotion, professional leaves, and other faculty benefits. The Ph.D. in English with a specialization in Rhetoric and Composition preferred; successful candidate will also bring knowledge of and experience with college-level writing instruction and with writing center practices. We are especially interested in applicants who have writing center administrative experience, a scholarly agenda connected to writing center work and an interest in collaborating with our graduate program in Rhetoric and Composition.

The RWC serves the entire FSU community through three sites of activity: the primary site in the English Department; a satellite site at the main library; and another site, with a digital studio, opening in the University's new learning center in fall 2011. Each site provides tutoring for undergraduate and graduate student writers; two of the three sites include program events such as an annual Digital Symposium; and each of them offers opportunities for research.

Responsibilities include managing and promoting all three sites of the RWC; orienting and supervising graduate tutors; working with a team of TAs to direct the RWC's peer tutoring program; coordinating with other campus student success programs and student government; assessing the RWC's efforts on an annual basis; and teaching one to two courses per year in the Department of English.

To apply, please send a letter of application, CV, and writing sample to Kathleen Blake Yancey, Chair, Search Committee, English Dept., 223B Williams, 631 University Way, Florida State U., Tallahassee, FL 32306.

Applications will be reviewed beginning Nov 30.

When I replied to his post, I wrote about the crying, not about the paper. He faced a first-year student who was fragile, worn out from studying, and lacking confidence. On top of that, she was female, and her response to stress was to let loose some tears. But Ray had little experience with this kind of situation, and he was in over his head. Though young men may generally have less experience than young women in dealing with tears, few tutors of either gender have confronted a distraught person in a semi-professional setting. You might give your roommate a big hug or a punch in the arm, but what do you do in the writing center? As Ray told us, his answer was to keep "trying to pull her back" from her feelings and talk about the paper. This didn't work. The student wasn't writing about a personal topic—she was just overwhelmed by her first semester at college. She may simply have needed a good cry to release her tension before being able to work further.

In this case, Honigs' advice was closest to the mark. Ray might have gotten the best response by giving the student more time to talk about what was really bothering her. He could also have given her a few minutes to collect herself privately before returning to the session. Repeatedly redirecting her to the paper, however, as Hudson might have suggested and as Ray attempted, was unhelpful.

LEARNING TOGETHER

Talking about these issues is essential in staff preparation. First, identify which scenarios have caused problems at your center in the past; experienced tutors will have a better grasp of what's common, while new tutors may see these issues with fresh eyes and their own strong emotions. Once the issues are identified, tutors can research particular topics before presenting them as a springboard for discussion. At our center, we singled out three emotions that our tutors had the greatest trouble responding to: anger, stress, and anxiety. Three volunteers found information they thought most relevant. Katie believed that general frustration was often redirected as anger toward a professor, so she focused on anger management tips. Liz thought that heavy workloads and academic demands led to feeling overwhelmed, so she researched literature on managing stress. Ben suggested that fear of being evaluated could lead to writer's block, so he explored ways to overcome writer's anxiety.

After presenting basic facts about anger, stress, and anxiety to the whole staff, the tutors acted out several scenarios. Katie portrayed a weepy student while Ben responded as a tutor unsure how to help. This launched an animated discussion of gender and whether stereotypes were applicable. Ben then pretended to be angry at a professor, and Liz responded by agreeing with his complaints. This gave the staff a chance to discuss how to act professionally while still empathizing. Finally, Liz played a stressed-out student, while Katie responded with both sympathy and professionalism. This led the group to brainstorm techniques for redirecting a session. Tutors were fully engaged in identifying problems and finding solutions, and they felt more confident about facing challenging sessions in the future.

Other centers may find their issues are different. Some schools, for example, have a significant portion of students from other cultures or countries with different attitudes toward emotions. In these cases, tutors could research the cultural backgrounds of key groups in the student body and discuss various tutoring approaches that take into account those backgrounds.

WAYS TO RESPOND

Despite differences among centers, some approaches can be widely applied. The first thing a tutor should do when confronted with an emotional writer is to assess the strength of the emotion. For example, is the student expressing normal anxiety about writing and being evaluated, or is he showing a deeper level of distress?

- Determine the nature of the problem by asking questions. ("Have you had this problem with other papers?") Try to determine if the feelings are temporary and fleeting or whether they indicate a deeper problem.

- If the emotions appear more immediate (“I have a big exam this afternoon, and I just can’t get everything done”), then spending a few minutes empathizing and “actively listening” may be all that’s needed before working on the paper.
- If the writer indicates a deeper problem (“I’ve never talked about this before” or “I don’t think I can get through this”), then you should carefully refer the student to campus resources such as the counseling center. It may not be possible to continue the session at this time; if appropriate, you could suggest rescheduling.

A writer might appear perfectly fine on arrival but visibly withdraw once you begin work. For example, she might cross her arms and sit back in her seat, disengaged from your comments or suggestions.

- If the writer responds poorly to advice and starts withdrawing during the session, you should change the tone. Point out more positives about the paper and take a break to chat about the background of the writing or the class to give the student a breather from critique.
- If you think the writer is apathetic (“you do my paper for me”) rather than emotionally upset (“I can’t stand to be criticized”), then you may need to respond more firmly. Remind the student that this is her work and that you are there to assist her, not to fix her paper.

If the intensity of an emotional session escalates and the student loses control, you should shift gears too.

- Give the writer a few moments to collect herself. Your first gesture might be to hand over a tissue (your writing center should provide tissue boxes—they send the message that the staff cares, but also that other students have shared the same situation.)
- Use your judgment about whether to offer a small physical gesture, such as lightly touching an arm. Don’t hug. Don’t appear too intimate. Combine empathy with a certain distance. This may make it easier for the person to regain control.
- If the student can’t regain composure, suggest that you take a break.
- Tell the student that this is a common situation. If you’ve lost control in front of a professor or someone else, you might briefly share the experience in one or two sentences.
- Before the writer leaves, mention the paper again. Suggest rescheduling or whatever next writing step is appropriate for the student, but end on a professional note.
- Whichever direction your preferences lead—whether it’s toward engaging the writer’s emotions or trying to keep greater distance—remember that you aren’t a trained counselor. You can offer a distraught writer temporary help in getting through a rough patch, but you aren’t expected to solve a student’s emotional problems.

It will be rare for you to face writers coming to you with such intense emotional displays, but it helps to know it can happen so that you can respond calmly. Ultimately, tutors should focus on providing writers what’s needed—whether it’s giving them a tissue, an ear, or a referral for more in-depth help—to help them return to their task. As teachers and tutors, we want to make a difference in the lives of the writers who walk through the door. Sometimes that task is straightforward. Sometimes it’s not. Becoming better tutors is, to a great extent, about developing a sense of what each situation requires. In the process of doing so, we learn how to be both better writers and better people. ♦

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Composition and Rhetoric, with WC/WPA experience Long Island University Brooklyn

The English Department at the Brooklyn campus of Long Island U. anticipates, pending budget approval, a September 2011 opening for a tenure-track Assistant Prof. in Composition and Rhetoric, with experience in Writing Center or Writing Program administration. Prefer candidates with a background in Classical Rhetoric. A Ph.D. in Composition and Rhetoric or English is required.

At LIU Brooklyn, the Directors of the Writing Center and Writing Program rotate in three-year terms. The successful candidate will assume directorship of the WC or WP after a suitable period of familiarization with the department (not to exceed three years), to be negotiated at the time of hire. All faculty teach composition as well as advanced undergraduate and graduate courses. The position of Assistant Professor requires nine credit-hours of teaching per semester, research and publication, and active service to the University. The Directors of the WC and WP teach six credits per semester.

In September 2010, the starting salary for Assistant Professors is \$62,874. Starting salaries for 2011 will be determined during the next union contract negotiations. For more information about the University, see <www.brooklyn.liu.edu/>.

Application review began October, 22, 2010. Please submit letter of application, curriculum vitae, 3 letters of reference, and a statement of teaching philosophy to: Leah Dilworth, Co-Chair, English Department, Long Island U., One University Plaza, Brooklyn, NY 11201.

LIU is an AA/EOP Employer.

TUTOR'S COLUMN

WE HAVE A SECRET: BALANCING DIRECTIVENESS AND NONDIRECTIVENESS DURING PEER TUTORING

*Kristin Boyd and Ann Haibeck
University of Illinois-Chicago
Chicago, IL*

Striking a balance between directiveness and non-directiveness is one of the most challenging aspects of being a peer tutor. Writers come to tutors for help, which gives us more authority, but the simple fact that a tutor is also a student makes us peers. As peer tutors, we try to be non-directive in an effort to help writers explore their own ideas but still give them valuable feedback. Yet some tutoring situations require a more directive approach. So we wonder if and when we're being too directive or not directive enough. Minute by minute, tutoring sessions are dynamic because a dialogue occurs during sessions; sometimes the writer leads the conversation, and sometimes the tutor leads, depending on who has more knowledge to share at a given time. As tutors, we need to be constantly aware of this dynamic and adjust our approach accordingly. We need to decide when to be more directive (giving information that we have) or non-directive (listening and guiding a writer because she has more information).

As part of tutor training at our writing center, tutors write weekly reflections on their tutoring sessions and post them to an online forum via the university. One of these online discussions extended into a more detailed, in-person discussion between the authors, Ann and Kristin, about Ann's use of both directive and nondirective tutoring techniques in a session. At the beginning of the session, the writer told Ann that the assignment was an analysis of a film she had watched during class. The writer said that there was no assignment sheet; the four-page paper had been verbally assigned two days before without much detail from the instructor. Despite this, the writer managed to write three pages, and she wanted to be sure she met the few criteria the professor had given for the assignment.

As Ann and the writer read the paper, it seemed as if the writer was looking for direction from the tutor about whether the paper she was writing was "right." From the vague instructions, it was hard for Ann to say whether the paper was meeting the professor's expectations. But even in a situation in which we are not sure what specifically is being asked of the writer, we can talk about what we see in the writer's paper. The writer was fulfilling many of the requirements of a film analysis, such as giving specific examples from the film's plot, as well as having strong, focused paragraphs.

Upon hearing Ann's reassurance that the writer had followed the conventions of a film analysis, the writer told Ann that she also needed to analyze film techniques. The writer had not learned about film techniques in class but did have some background knowledge, indicated by her references to symbolism. Since Ann had taken a cinematography class, she was able to tell the writer about the most common film techniques and the purpose of their use. Due to her greater knowledge of film analysis, Ann realized the potential for becoming too directive in this session, therefore preventing the writer from actively learning. As a result, Ann tried to avoid directiveness by using the non-directive approach of asking questions.

Frustration on the part of both tutor and writer usually happens when the tutor tries to be non-directive when directiveness would be more effective. Ann asked questions such as the following: "If barriers such as furniture separate the characters, what might that imply about their relationships?" This only made the writer frustrated because she did not know enough about film techniques to answer the question. Ann had been fishing for specific answers, playing the guessing game that John Paul Tassoni described in which "[t]he keeper of the secret does not engage in a dialogue with his listener, but speaks to maintain the listener's separation from what is known" (197). As a result, "the guesser speaks not to create knowledge, but to discover what is known" (197). By monitoring the dialogue, Ann began

to hear herself unintentionally quizzing the writer. Keeping a Tassoni-like secret contradicts the idea of a writing center as a place of dialogue and discussion and can make the tutoring session seem more like a time for writers to uncover the “real answers” to writing. Fortunately, Ann remembered to step back mentally and evaluate the effectiveness of the conversation in progress. By trying to see the conversation from the writer’s perspective, she saw that the guessing game was only becoming more frustrating for both herself and the writer. In this situation, a transition to directive tutoring made it easier and less confusing for the writer to understand how to analyze films. Since Ann knew more about cinematography, she was able to explicitly explain a few of the most common cinematographic effects. Ann divulged her Tassoni-like secret, and the session was able to move forward and become productive again. By being directive at appropriate times, Ann gave the writer the information she needed to complete her film analysis.

As the writer began to understand the examples, Ann again became non-directive, helping the writer to apply this new knowledge to her paper and the film. They moved on to analyzing specific scenes, which increased the writer’s confidence. Ann continued by asking more specific questions about the scenes the writer wanted to analyze, such as “What was the lighting like in this scene?” and “What did you notice about the characters’ body language?” These questions helped the writer do the analysis on her own. Dialogue remained open, and the session helped further the writer’s own critical thinking, instead of leading the tutor to hide answers or write the paper for the writer. The writer verbally shared more examples from the film and became more eager to try out new analyses. Ultimately, the writer took charge of her own paper and her own learning.

At first, Ann, like many other tutors, was uncomfortable about taking the lead and being too directive in her session. Directiveness, though, plays a key role in tutoring, and aligns with Peter Carino’s assertion that “tutors should be taught to recognize where the power and authority lie in any given tutorial, when and to what degree they have them, when and to what degree the student has them, and when and to what degree they are absent in any given tutorial” (108). To achieve this recognition of the balance of power and authority, tutors can think of a tutoring session as a ship occupied by both the writer and tutor, an idea previously introduced by Tim Grau (1998). During very directive periods of tutoring, we view the tutor as the authoritative captain and the writer as a crewmember, simply following directions of the captain; the tutor takes a teacher-like position in which the writer learns according to the tutor’s perception of the writer’s needs rather than the writer’s perception.

On the other hand, the tutor could take a much more passive role. If a writer comes looking for more direction, as Ann’s writer did, and the tutor does not provide that direction, no one captains the ship, and both the tutor and the writer become frustrated. In our experience, a balance between acting as the commanding captain and the passive passenger leads to the most productive tutoring sessions. Like two people steering a paddleboat, both participants must communicate clearly and make mutual decisions without overbearing authority from either party. By partnering with the writer to achieve the writer’s goals and sharing information when it is relevant, tutors can optimize their time with writers. When the tutor implements both directive and non-directive strategies—based on an exchange of dialogue, the dynamic of the session, and who has more knowledge—tutors can facilitate a more open, welcoming, and productive learning environment in which writers and tutors work together to help writers become responsible for their own learning. ♦

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CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

Nov. 3-6, 2010. International Writing Centers Association/National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, in Baltimore, MD
Contact: Barb Lutz and John Nordlof. E-mail: IWCAconference2010@english.udel.edu; conference website: <<http://www.mawcaonline.org/iwca>>.

Feb. 17-18, 2011: Middle East North Africa Writing Centers Alliance, in Dubai, UAE
Contact: Maria Elftheriou (meleftheriou@aus.edu) and Lynne Ronesi (Ironesi@aus.edu); conference website: <<http://menawca.org/13.html>>.

Feb. 17-19, 2011: Southeastern Writing Centers Association, in Tuscaloosa, AL
Contact: Luke Niiler: e-mail: lniiler@ua.edu; phone: 205-348-9460.

Feb. 17-19, 2011: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Houston, TX
Contact: Chloe Diepenbrock, Diepenbrock@uhcl.edu; conference website: <<http://ualr.edu/scwca/2011%20Conf%20Website/callforpapers.html>>.

Feb. 26, 2011: Southern California Writing Centers Association, in Riverside, CA
Contact: Denise Kruizena-Muro, Denise.Kruizena-Muro@rcc.edu; conference website: <www.socal-writingcenters.org/>.

March 3-5, 2011: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Kalamazoo, MI
Contact: Kim Ballard: 269-387-4615; conference website: <<http://www.ecwca.org>>.

March 12-13, 2011: Northeast Writing Centers Association, in Hooksett, NH
Contact: Kerry Rourke: krourke@babson.edu; conference website: <<http://www.northeastwca.org>>.