

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

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

Jan/Feb, 2011

— FROM THE EDITOR —

As we start the new year (and try to remember to write “2011”), articles in this issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* focus on overcoming difficulties or misunderstandings that can occur in tutorials. Gayla Mills explores ways tutors might help student writers work through emotional difficulties—difficulties that may bring a tutorial to a crashing halt. Rebecca Babcock’s research—on understanding how some students with “pragmatic impairment” do not understand what tutors may be asking them—will assist us in recognizing such difficulties so that we can adjust tutorial talk appropriately, and Judy Gill’s research into strategies discussed in tutor training manuals reveals a drumbeat of negatives, the “do not’s” that can be counterproductive. Also, Kristin Boyd and Ann Haibeck reflect on their tutorial moves as they shift between directive and nondirective tutoring.

On page 5 you’ll see a list of winners of major writing center awards, presented in November at the IWCA conference in Baltimore. The awards were accompanied by eloquent presentation speeches and a news announcement for the Ron Maxwell Award. Merely listing the names of the award winners doesn’t allow us to understand the many contributions these writing center directors have made to our field. And so, in order to make those descriptions available, we have uploaded the speeches and announcement to the WLN website, in the “Other Stuff” section: <writinglabnewsletter.org/new/>. While you’re browsing there, check out the new design and added information now available on the site.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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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

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prepare. We can recall how we felt when we struggled with our own writing, listened to the advice of other tutors and teachers, researched the basics of handling emotional challenges, and discussed various approaches we might take.

1. 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 next to 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 was about to cry in our small group, 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.

2. 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 "[b]y 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 not surprising 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," Corinne Agnostinelli, Helena Poch, and Elizabeth 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 begin 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.

3. 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.”

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 lacked confidence. On top of that, she was female, and

“Ultimately, tutors should focus on providing writers what’s needed—whether it’s giving them a tissue, an ear, or a phone number for more in-depth help—to help them return to their task.”

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.

4. LEARNING TOGETHER

Talking about these issues is the basis for 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 that 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 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 phone number 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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NEWS

2010 AWARD WINNERS

Awards presented at the November 2010 IWCA conference include the following:

International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Muriel Harris Outstanding Service Award:
Presented to Leigh Ryan

International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Special One-Time Recognition Award for Sustained Dedication to the European Writing Centers Association:
Presented to Dilek Tokay

National Conference in Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW) Ron Maxwell Award:
Presented to Brian Fallon

(For the full text of presentations and an announcement made for these awards, please see WLN’s website: <writinglabnewsletter.org>, in the “Other Stuff” section.)

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Writing Center/WAC Director
Nova Southeastern University

The Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences of Nova Southeastern University seeks a faculty candidate to provide leadership in writing center development and administration and in writing across the curriculum, and to teach undergraduate courses in composition, writing, and rhetoric. Writing center administration and writing across the curriculum experience is necessary. Earned terminal degree in Composition/Rhetoric or English is strongly preferred; minimum requirement is Master's degree in Composition/Rhetoric or English with progress toward terminal degree. Faculty rank is dependent on terminal degree, college level teaching experience, and scholarship. Candidates with college-level teaching experience and a plan for active scholarship are preferred. Interest in or experience with teaching or developing online courses is a plus.

Review of applications begins immediately; position begins August 2011. Rank TBD. Applications accepted until position is filled (12-month faculty).

To apply and for more information visit www.nsujobs.com/applicants/Central?quickFind=74491.

WHEN SOMETHING IS NOT QUITE RIGHT: PRAGMATIC IMPAIRMENT AND COMPENSATION IN THE COLLEGE WRITING TUTORIAL¹

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Like all talk, tutoring talk follows unwritten rules of pragmatics. Pragmatics is “[the study of] the use of linguistic and non-linguistic capacities for the purpose of communication” (Perkins, *Pragmatic* 10). Since the tutoring session is not a “regular” conversation, conversational rules apply in a non-conventional way. Many times, even in non-directive tutoring,² the tutor wants to direct the tutee to provide some information or to do something, but the directive can be either directly or indirectly stated (“Read this.” vs. “Would you mind reading this?”). It's important to keep in mind the difference between non-directive (or Socratic) tutoring, in which the tutor attempts to draw ideas out of the student, and indirect speech acts, which are actually requests for information or behavior couched in language that is conventionally polite. Since the participants in a tutoring session are purportedly engaged in a mutual goal-oriented, cooperative behavior, the concept of the Cooperative Principle is relevant: “Make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 26). If the principle is violated, it is up to the interlocutors to figure out why the other party is being indirect, ambiguous, or obscure and to play along accordingly.

For some, this capacity to “play along” is impaired. This state of “something not being quite right” with language in use is known as pragmatic impairment,³ and is associated with diagnoses as varied as Asperger's syndrome, autism, learning disability, traumatic brain injury, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (Perkins, “Pragmatic Ability” 367; van Balkom and Verhoven 289). Definitions of pragmatic impairment are often vague, such as “problems with language use” (Perkins, “Pragmatic Impairment”). Perkins notes some specific features that may be present with pragmatic impairment, but the reader must be aware that people with pragmatic impairment don't necessarily exhibit every feature: “problems understanding sarcasm . . . indirect requests, irony, and punchlines of jokes . . . indirect replies . . . lies . . . ambiguity resolution . . . text and discourse processing . . . and others' mental states, attitudes and emotions” (“Clinical” 11).

Since tutoring sessions involve talk, pragmatic impairment can influence the interaction. According to Perkins, the unimpaired individual will often compensate to help the other person and create equilibrium. This may cause a complication in the tutoring session if such compensation goes against “rules” of tutoring. For instance, if a person in a non-tutorial situation has problems with word retrieval, the conversational partner may offer up possible words, while in a tutoring situation, a tutor may have been trained not to provide words for a tutee.

There have been no previous studies of pragmatic impairment in writing centers. Also, studies of pragmatics involving non-impaired individuals in writing centers are few in number and have usually concentrated on politeness (Thonus; Young; Murphy) or non-verbal behavior, also an aspect of pragmatics (Boudreaux). Research studies of students with disabilities in the writing center have been done by Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz and by Jennifer Wewers. In both these studies, students with learning disabilities were surveyed or interviewed, resulting in similar findings. Although pragmatics was not the focus of either study, tutees with dyslexia told Wewers they needed more time to answer questions and tutors should rephrase questions when necessary. They wanted tutors to meet their problems head on—but with tact. Kiedaisch and Dinitz found that tutees with learning disabilities rated tutoring sessions lower than any other group. Students reported the need for more precise

assistance from tutors. As I have suggested elsewhere (“Research-Based”), tutors, when working with deaf tutees, should consider pragmatics, particularly the types of questions they ask and the appropriateness of directive and non-directive tutoring styles.

Perkins claims the cause or definition of pragmatic impairment is not as important as the actual behaviors observed. So rather than list the behaviors and definitions found in other studies, I will focus on two sessions I observed, explain my observations, and when appropriate, compare those instances to what other researchers have found. It should not be inferred that these are all or the only aspects of pragmatics or pragmatic impairment, but simply the ones observed occurring between a particular tutee and her tutor.

I observed two tutoring sessions involving a 21-year-old white woman—a musical theater major with a diagnosed learning disability—and her tutor, an older African-American woman with a Master’s degree in Special Education. The tutee informed both researcher and tutor about her learning disability. When asked to explain it further, she preferred not to speak to me directly, instead referring me to her mother, explaining that her mother is her spokesperson in these matters. Her mother wrote to me that the student has a specific learning disability affecting her receptive and expressive language abilities (the terms “specific language impairment” or “pragmatic impairment” were not used). Her mother, who is an educator, explained that the student “has receptive and expressive language deficits. These impede her ability to read and express herself orally in a clear, concise, grammatically correct manner. She has difficulty decoding nuances of social language.”

People with pragmatic impairment have trouble with inference, which involves understanding the reasons behind why a person might make a particular statement or ask a particular question, and as a result, the impaired person may take requests quite literally. In cases of pragmatic impairment, the “inferential burden must be taken on by the interlocutor, who is required to expend greater effort in being more linguistically explicit and leaving less to infer” (Perkins, *Pragmatic* 20).

In the case of this tutee, the following exchange illustrates just that, her lack of understanding of the reason behind a question. The tutee and tutor are discussing *Giovanni’s Room* by James Baldwin:

Tutor: David, the story’s about David, right? Was David a straight guy or a gay guy?

Tutee: We don’t know.

Tutor: Did David know?

Tutee: No.

Tutor: Did he know in the end?

Tutee: I don’t think so, no.

Tutor: Why didn’t he know?

Tutee: I don’t know, you gotta read the story.

Tutor: I don’t have to read the story, I have to read your paper.

Tutee: I don’t remember. Ask [the teacher]. She’ll tell you. I don’t know.

Tutor: Come on . . . , let’s stop that.

In this case, the tutee misunderstands the intention of the tutor, seeming to think the tutor is genuinely interested in the plot of the novel and the sexual orientation of the main character. We know, through our knowledge of tutoring and our pragmatic understanding, that the tutor is trying to elicit ideas from the tutee to enhance the argument of her paper or perhaps to help her generate examples that she can use as evidence to support her points. Instead, the tutee answers the tutor’s questions with suggestions that she read the book herself or ask the teacher to get the answers she seems to want. The tutee refers the tutor to the book or teacher several more times during the tutoring session.

At one point, the tutee shows the tutor the book and says, “There you go, you can read this stuff here.” The tutor responds, “You need it for your paper. I don’t need to read it.” And then the tutee responds,

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Composition Studies

<<http://www.compositionstudies.uwinnipeg.ca>>

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“Yes, you do, cause you want to know these things.” In a related example given by Perkins, a teacher and student are looking at slides:

Teacher: What can you see?
Rosie: And they’re going in the sand.
Teacher: Mm?
Rosie: You have a look
Teacher: Well you have a look and tell me
I’ve seen it already
I want to see what you can see (*Pragmatic 78*)

Perkins explains the impaired person is not able to conceive of the task, a display task not very common outside the classroom or tutoring situation. In most real-life situations when a person asks for information, she genuinely wants it, so a suggestion about how to get that information (have a look, ask the teacher, read the book) would be appropriate. However, the tutor, like the teacher above, attempts to explain the task (“I don’t have to read the book, I have to read your paper”), but then gets frustrated with the tutee as if she is intentionally trying to be difficult (“Come on . . . let’s stop that”).

In another instance, the tutee again takes the tutor literally:

Tutor: OK. Where you have “and” here and someplace else. How would those sound if, if you took those “ands” out and made two independent sentences? [falling intonation]
Tutee: I don’t know.

Tutor: It’s kind of long. [reads] I think you can put a period over here [reads]. Take out the “and.”

The falling intonation indicates that this is not a literal question, but a suggestion for revision. If it were a literal question, the intonation would be rising. The tutee does not perceive this and answers as if it were a request for information. She literally does not know how it would sound if the sentence were revised thusly. In a related example given by Perkins, a speech therapist is working with a child with autistic spectrum disorder:

T: Can you turn the page over?
C: Yes. (No sign of continuing)
T: Go on then (points)
C: (turns the page over) (*Pragmatic Impairment 67*)

In this case the therapist compensated for the lack of understanding by becoming more directive. Since the tutor’s tutor training encouraged her to be non-directive, she was hesitant to take on this more directive role, even when misunderstood. Instead she answers with another comment—“It’s kind of long,”—presumably a hint to revise the sentence, and then compensates for the tutee’s lack of understanding by directing her on how to revise the sentence. Even then, though, she does so indirectly (“I think you can . . .”).

Pragmatic impairment can also involve unusual or incorrect use of words. In the following excerpt, the tutor compensates for the tutee’s semantic slip when talking about the analysis of the book she was reading:

Tutee: It wasn’t vague enough.
Tutor: I’m—It was vague?
Tutee: It was.

The tutor at first begins speaking, realizes what the tutee has said, and then compensates by reformulating the utterance correctly. Often the tutee attempts to get what she needs by asking questions, such as turning the tutor’s statements around into questions. For instance,

Tutor: You’re not making it clear.
Tutee: Well, how can I make it clear?

She does this several times, and sometimes gets real answers that help her write her paper. Perkins indicates that this type of repetition, or “echolalia,” is actually a very productive device. Also in the session they engage in meta-discourse about how to proceed, and the tutee begins to explain her problem and what she needs:

Tutor: I’m trying to help you. . . . What would you have me do?
Tutee: I don’t know. Just read it and let me know what you think or something.
Tutor: I’m, I’m trying—
Tutee: You’re not telling me, though.

Perkins does not mention the capacity of the impaired person to be able to step back and explain the type of interaction and compensation that would be most useful. In an interview, the tutee told me that she asked questions because she wanted to learn and that she liked it when the tutors would give “tips,” and she wished the tutor would “explain more.” She told me she liked the way her other tutors would push her and give her lots of ideas to write about. With this tutor, she said, “Like if she’s not, like, explaining stuff to me, I get kind of like, confused.” Meta-discourse—either during or after the session—surrounding odd or frustrating tutoring sessions would be productive, as would tutors realizing that an impaired person was not trying to be difficult or resistant but simply had difficulties communicating.

Again, in normal conversation, the unimpaired partner will likely compensate for the impaired member of the pair. However, in tutoring, tutor training may proscribe these behaviors. In most cases in my observed sessions, the tutor compensated for the tutee’s impairment, but could have been more direct in her explanations of *what* she wanted the tutee to do and *why* she was asking particular questions.

Perkins makes some suggestions about ways that an interlocutor can scaffold for a person with discourse-related pragmatic impairment:

- Provide backchannel feedback and encouragement
- Ask questions to help person focus
- Reformulate utterances to provide model sentences
- “Provide a linguistic formulation when [the person] is only able to produce a gesture.”
(*Pragmatic* 137)

The tutor compensated in several ways, such as asking questions, although she could have explained better to the tutee what the questions were for. And she did help the tutee reformulate an utterance from “It was too vague” to “It was vague.” I did not observe much backchannelling,⁴ except for a few instances of “OK,” and the tutor did not provide any linguistic formulations in response to a gesture.

Terese Thonus, in an article on tutoring second-language writers in the writing center, introduces a concept that I recommend for tutors working with students with disabilities that interfere with pragmatic understanding. This is the Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID). Thonus found that with non-native speaking tutees and native speaking tutors, the use of IFIDs “may increase the comprehensibility of tutor suggestions” (275), since non-native speakers may misunderstand pragmatic cues due to cultural differences (rather than impairments). In traditional linguistics, these devices include facial expression, pauses, intonation, and discourse markers. But since individuals with pragmatic impairments have difficulty understanding these aspects (Perkins “Pragmatic Impairment” 229), tutors can use an explicit IFID. Some of the more explicit IFIDs that Thonus observed native-English speaking tutors using with non-native English speaking tutees were, “I have to recommend that you do it this way,” and “That’s just a suggestion” (274).

In the tutoring sessions I observed, when the tutor asked the tutee to tell her what happened to David, and the tutee answered, “You have to read the story,” the tutor replied, “I don’t have to read the story, I have to read your paper.” This response is still rather indirect and leaves the interlocutor to infer that she, as the writer, needs to determine the needed material and then put the material into the paper. The tutor could have explained, “I am asking these questions to help you come up with ideas about what to put in the paper.” Although this may seem obvious to people with unimpaired pragmatic processing abilities, these types of statements will assist those tutees who do not perceive the speaker’s meaning behind an utterance.

Oftentimes, in the name of “non-directive” tutoring, tutors will utter open-ended questions, but the actual intention is directive. This can be seen in the following example when the tutor says, “Why do you think David lied to Joey?” She is not curious, but she is attempting to direct the tutee to write the answer

TAKE NOTE

JAPAN WRITING CENTER SYMPOSIUM

Call for Proposals
March 9, 2011
Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages
Tokyo, Japan
Themes: “Nuts & Bolts” and “Issues & Ideas”

The “Nuts & Bolts” sessions will look at the practical side of setting up and running a successful writing center, while “Issues & Ideas” will look at some of the academic issues that concern writing centers. Proposals for workshops (60 minutes), research papers (25 minutes) and Poster Sessions should be sent by February 1 to Herman Bartelen at herman-b@kifl.ac.jp.

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Endnotes

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² Non-directive tutoring as writing center lore has been discussed by Isabelle Thompson and colleagues, and the practice has been problematized by Linda Shamon and Deborah Burns.

³ It is also known as pragmatic disorder, pragmatic disability, and semantic-pragmatic disorder.

⁴ Backchannels are short responses in conversation that do not involve a conversational turn, but rather provide encouragement to the speaker or confirm that the listener is following along. Common backchannel responses are "Right," "OK," or "Yeah."

⁵ Tutors should use caution and tact, and remember that only trained professionals may attempt to diagnose a disability. People interested in learning more about this topic should read *Pragmatic Impairment* by Michael Perkins.



in her paper. The tutor goes on to say, "That's an analysis, telling me why." She could have also added, "You need to take the answers to these questions and write about them in your paper." This would have explained to the tutee explicitly what the questions and answers were for. In the actual tutorial, the tutee insisted on referring the tutor to the book to read the answers to her questions. This caused the tutor frustration, and perhaps even caused her to misinterpret the tutee's misunderstanding as outright sassiness:

Tutor: [reads from Squirt's paper] Why? Why do you think David lied to Joey? That's an analysis, telling me why.

Tutee: Well, because they're not friends anymore.

Tutor: Why are they not friends anymore?

Tutee: Because, you know, about that incident that they had. You know, it's on the first page.

Tutor: I know. But [name, name], stop, stop, stop. OK. We gotta get through this.

For people with unimpaired pragmatic processing it's hard to comprehend how frustrating it must be to be on the other end of non-directive tutoring.

I recommend that tutor trainers explain what pragmatic impairment is and for tutors to be on the lookout for tutees taking statements and questions extremely literally or using words in ways that seem wrong or strange from a semantic or syntactic standpoint. In this way, tutors can be aware of sessions that seem frustrating, where the tutee gives odd answers or seems resistant to give the type of answers the tutor is trying to elicit.⁵ In these possible cases of pragmatic impairment, the tutor can try an explicit Illocutionary Force Indicating Device or other compensatory moves and tell the tutee the intent behind the utterance in addition to engaging in meta-discourse about the communication in the tutoring session. Finally, tutor trainers should be aware that sometimes compensation for a disability will involve offering a word or words for a tutee or being very direct about what needs to happen in the tutoring session. Consideration of these factors will help immeasurably in meeting the needs of tutees with pragmatic impairment and others who learn differently. ◆

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IN-HOUSE TUTOR HANDBOOKS AND THE PROBLEM OF NEGATIVE RHETORIC

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Last year as I began revising the in-house tutor handbook that we use to supplement our writing center's tutor-training program, I looked at other centers' handbooks to get ideas for changes we might want to make to ours. I collected and examined 50 handbooks by searching writing center websites and sending a request for handbooks to the WCenter and SLAC-WPA (Small Liberal Arts College Writing Program Administrators) listservs. The most common section in this sample of handbooks is "The Tutoring Session," which presents an overview of a "typical" writing center conference; it offers advice to tutors about what should normally be done to ensure that the session is student-centered, collaborative, and process oriented, long standing principles of writing center pedagogy.

While this section, in its various iterations, offers many positive and useful recommendations to tutors, I find a prevalence of negative imperatives, often presented as "Thou Shalt Not's"; "Do not write on students' papers"; and "Do not correct students' errors" are typical. This negative rhetoric, which I was not looking for, is at odds with principles and practices that writing center directors emphasize in tutor training—tutor flexibility, agency, and responsiveness to different student needs and situations—and this negativity may encourage the very practices it aims to prevent. Moreover, it contradicts the traditional philosophy of non-directive tutoring that most handbooks advocate; many handbooks are, ironically, very directive and prescriptive when it comes to reminding tutors not to be directive or prescriptive.

Many of these proscriptions were first articulated in Stephen North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984) and Jeff Brooks's "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work" (1991). To assert a new self-definition and to correct colleagues' misconceptions about writing centers, North explains what we do and don't do, summed up in his famous axiom: "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). Similarly, in many handbooks, the description of tutoring goals and strategies is stated as a positive and a negative binary. One handbook urges its consultants to "*[r]emember that your goal is not to create a great paper but to teach the student to be a better writer*" (italics in the original), while another tells tutors to "[t]each the writer, not the writing. Don't try to create the perfect paper. Try to create a better writer. In many ways, this commandment sums up all the others." Brooks, addressing a writing center audience, also tells tutors what to do and not to do so lest they become editors. It's not that the advice North and Brooks offer is "wrong"; however, it is stated in a way that undercuts the complexity of tutoring, telling tutors never to do things that in fact we sometimes do. Moreover, the persistence of this negative rhetoric in our handbooks indicates that it has failed to dispel myths and correct misconceptions about writing centers and may even be counterproductive. Muriel Harris is among a number of scholars who have noted negativity in the rhetoric of writing center publications and materials. In a forthcoming *Writing Center Journal* article, she argues that the persistence of this negative rhetoric—a "litany of what we are not"—is "proof that we need to rework the discourse not working for us" (2).

An emphasis on what we don't do can be seen in North's attempts to correct colleagues' view of writing centers as "fix-it shops," a view still held by many outside the writing center community. North's dismay is still felt by writing center directors today as almost every handbook mentions this misperception and offers strategies for correcting it. For example, while "Idea" asserts a positive self-definition of writing centers, it also reassures those outside the writing center community that we do not infringe on faculty prerogatives. North writes that "...we never evaluate or second-guess any teacher's syllabus, assignments, comments, or grades" (441). In one handbook's "Ten Commandments of Tutoring," tutors are told to "maintain your role as tutor and not teacher. Do not challenge the instructor's authority or question the instructor's methods—at least not in front of your client, anyway." In distinguishing the differences between being a tutor and being a teacher, North writes that "...we [do] not assign the writing, and we will not grade it" (442). In one handbook's list of "Major Do Not's," tutors are told, "Do not tell students what grade you would give a paper or if you think it's 'good' or 'okay.'" Our own writing center's handbook, until the 2010-2011 version, also contained the same ubiquitous negative directives: "Do not criticize professors or their assignments," "Do not pass judgment on grades or comments that professors give," and "Do not 'evaluate' a paper or predict that grade it will get." North's "Idea" attempts in part to correct misperceptions about writing centers and to allay the concerns of skeptics, which was appropriate for his intended audience. However, such concerns are misplaced in a handbook intended for tutors who do not have these misperceptions about or mistrust

of writing centers. In our writing center, we are aware of the persistence of these misperceptions, so in our tutor-training course, we discuss ways to respond to students' requests for a grade or criticism of a professor or assignment.

Negative rhetoric in the handbooks also echoes Brooks's article, in which he offers tutors practical tips and techniques to employ in tutoring sessions in order to accomplish what he and North see as the goal of writing centers. Brooks takes North's idea one step farther by arguing that "[w]hen you 'improve' a student's paper, you haven't been a tutor at all; you've been an editor" (2). Following Brooks's lead, some handbooks issue blanket proscriptions against proofreading and editing: one has a "*no proofreading or editing policy*" (italics in the original), while in another, tutors are admonished: "Don't proofread or edit, no matter how much the student begs." Much of Brooks's advice to tutors is couched in fixed binaries—for example, "the student, not the tutor, should 'own' the paper and take full responsibility for it" (3)—that are echoed in many handbooks. One handbook reminds tutors to "*Make sure that the client retains ownership of his or her paper*" (italics in the original) while another tells its tutors that "whenever you are tempted to make a correction, to rewrite a sentence, to suggest a better word, or to suggest a better topic—don't." Another of Brooks's absolutes—"don't let yourself have a pencil in your hand" (3)—is found in many handbooks:

The student, NOT THE TUTOR, should be the only person writing on the student's actual draft" (caps in the original).

"NEVER WRITE ON DRAFTS! Students must be responsible for the authorship of their own papers" (caps and bold in the original).

While it is generally a good idea to have the student write on his or her own paper, such blanket proscriptions inhibit a tutor's flexibility and agency and limit the range of available tutoring strategies.

It is important to note, however, that while most handbooks recommend that tutors employ non-directive strategies for the most part, some allow for occasional "bending of the rules." One handbook, for example, states that

a consultant must generally employ non-directive/minimalist consulting strategies and avoid directive techniques that can lead to traps of editing and dependency. . . . Sometimes you will need to be more directive in your consulting. These circumstances might include working with writers for whom English is not their first language, learning disabled writers, or writers working in an unfamiliar form or with an unfamiliar genre.

Another handbook endorses Brooks's minimalist approach, but allows for some flexibility:

Let the writer retain "ownership" of their paper and the writing process. They should mark on their own paper. . . . However, sometimes it will make sense for you to hold the pencil—perhaps taking notes while the writer talks.

Being more directive is "allowed," but as an exception to the general "rule," rather than as an effective pedagogical approach in its own right. These proscriptions may reflect what Irene Clark and Dave Healy call "a pedagogy of self-defense" (242) that "precludes both the appropriation of student texts and any challenge to teachers' authority . . ." (245). This pedagogy is aimed at forestalling criticism from people outside the writing center community who may harbor suspicions that tutors write papers for students. Clark and Healy find many articles in early issues of *WLN* that urge "tutor restraint," which has become a "moral imperative" (246). They argue that blind adherence to this orthodoxy of "pure" tutoring can be "counterproductive to student learning because it precludes other instructional possibilities" (251) like those offered in Linda Shamon and Debra Burns's "A Critique of Pure Tutoring."

As a result of reading in-house tutor handbooks and critically examining our own handbook, I've come to doubt the usefulness, effectiveness, and appropriateness of "The Tutoring Session" section for several reasons. First, it reinvents the wheel in summarizing material covered in tutor-training programs and is not particularly useful or necessary for new tutors who have completed such a program. In fact, an informal survey of our tutors revealed that they sometimes consult the handbook on matters of policy or procedure, but not on tutoring strategies and techniques offered in "The Tutoring Section" because those topics were already covered in class. Second, the summary view provided in the handbook of a "typical" writing center conference is necessarily brief and therefore an oversimplification of what really goes on in a writing center conference. Third, its negative rhetoric can be counterproductive to tutor growth, flexibility, and effectiveness. By issuing blanket proscriptions, tutor handbooks deny tutors the flexibility to respond to the many variables present in any tutoring situation. Sometimes, the tutor should have a pencil in her hand. Sometimes rewriting a student's sentence can improve the writer. As Jeanne Simpson writes in the September 2010 issue of *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, "[t]he boundaries between what 'should' happen in a writing center and what does happen and what might happen are porous to say the least" (4). I think we need to acknowledge, even celebrate, that porous nature of writing center work and eliminate the negative rhetoric in the handbooks intended for our tutors.

Thus, in revising our in-house tutor handbook for the new academic year, we have made several changes. Our revised handbook is designed to serve the purposes outlined by Jeanette Harris (1984) and Bob Barnett and Jacqueline Kleinedler (2001) in their articles on in-house handbooks. It spells out the job responsibilities of tutors, office coordinators, and writing associates; it contains a routine procedures section; and it provides “formal written policies to turn to when problems arise” (Barnett and Kleinedler 11). The handbook is a text to read and discuss toward the end of tutor training and a resource to consult when the director and associate director are not available to answer questions. Because we cover in depth strategies and techniques to employ in conferences, we have removed “The Tutoring Session” section. In its place, we have added tutor voices to the handbook by including essays written by tutors-in-training and plan to add a “Tips for Tutoring” section written by tutors based on their own experiences in the writing center. The tips section will more accurately reflect what really happens in tutoring sessions, rather than what should or should not happen.

Beyond prompting us to revise our handbook, my examination of handbooks, coupled with Muriel Harris’s article and essays written by A. J. Wildey and Sarah O’Neill for our most recent tutor-training course, has led me to examine critically the ways our writing center communicates its mission, goals, and practices to our various institutional audiences—especially students and faculty. Harris provides a convincing explanation for why decades of trying to dispel myths about writing centers by stating over and over again what we do not do has failed. Wildey and O’Neill note that misconceptions about the Writing Center at our college persist and that our attempts to change those perceptions have fallen short. Wildey contends that we have failed “to ensure that we do not unwittingly send mixed messages about the true focus of sessions and the ultimate mission of the Writing Center” (1). She finds on our website, especially in the FAQs section, that there is an emphasis on what we don’t do without making clear in a “concrete” and “accessible” way what we do in language that students will understand. O’Neill similarly argues that we need “to work toward improving student . . . perceptions of the writing center” (1) and calls for a “rebranding” of the writing center, a business practice of “giving an organization a new image in order to make it more attractive and increase its success” (5). At the center of this rebranding effort, O’Neill writes, is the presentation of the writing center “in a more positive light” (6).

My original project was narrow in scope and purpose—to examine and analyze the contents of in-house tutor handbooks and perhaps adopt some features of other handbooks for our own handbook—but it has forced me to take a close look at the rhetoric of all the forms of writing we produce—our web site, our brochure, reports—and to acknowledge the need for change. Revising our handbook is only the first, and the easiest, step. Revising—both re-seeing and re-writing—our public discourse will take more time and effort. It will mean, as Harris puts it, shifting “our perspective from what we don’t do to that of the various institutional audiences we are writing for” (27) and finding more effective ways of getting the message out about how students can benefit from visiting our writing center. ♦

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TUTOR'S COLUMN

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

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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. Ann could see that 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 like, "If barriers such as furniture separate the characters, what might that imply about their relationships?" This only made the writer frustrated, since 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 has 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 mentally step back 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 to do the analysis on her own. Dialogue remained open, and the session helped to 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

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: lpniiler@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 Kruiuzenga-Muro, Denise.Kruiuzenga-Muro@rcc.edu; conference website: <www.social-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 9, 2011: Japan Writing Center Symposium, in Tokyo, Japan

Contact: Scott Johnston: johnston@wilmina.ac.jp



March 12-13, 2011: Northeast Writing Centers Association, in Hooksett, NH

Contact: Kerry Rourke: krouрке@babson.edu; conference website: <<http://www.northeast-wca.org>>.

