

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E W T T E R

Volume 37, Number 1-2

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

Sept./Oct., 2012

— FROM THE EDITOR —

As many of us launch into our new academic year, *WLN* starts its 37th year with an issue containing articles, book reviews, and conference announcements. When Eliot Rendleman heard himself explaining that the writing center's goal is to help students become "independent writers," he wondered what that term actually means to students, teachers, authors of articles, and tutors. His study provides us with insights into how important it is that we ask stakeholders about how they understand our terminology. Then, Valerie Balester offers valuable arguments as to why having international tutors in the writing center benefits the entire writing center as well as the students working with these tutors.

Another topic writing center conversations are engaged in is racism and anti-racism activism. To help us learn about some scholarly contributions to this topic, we have two highly informative book reviews: Jackie Grutsch McKinney reviews Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan's edited collection, *Writing Centers and the New Racism*, and Lori Salem reviews Frankie Condon's *I Hope I Join the Band*. Barrie E. Olson concludes this issue with her Tutor's Column essay on the difficult situation of tutoring faculty who come to the center.

And we're happy to announce the addition of two new *WLN* staff members, Alan Benson and Lee Ann Glowzenski (see p. 9), and our new blog for writing centers in countries around the world (see p. 11). For everyone planning on traveling to the IWCA conference in San Diego, from Oct. 25-27, safe travels, and I'll see you there.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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LEXICOGRAPHY: SELF-ANALYSIS AND DEFINING THE KEYWORDS OF OUR MISSIONS

◆ Eliot Rendleman
Columbus State University
Columbus, GA

After returning from a class visit last fall to advertise the mission and services of the writing center I direct, I sat at my desk with an emerging concern over a statement that I have dogmatically repeated to myself and to others since 1996: "One of the major goals of the writing center is to help you become independent writers." As usual, I quickly moved on to answer any questions from the students and the teacher without qualifying exactly what I meant by "independent writers." And why not move on without qualification? Wouldn't everyone know what I mean by the term, especially in the land of Independence Day, famous bootstrap narratives, and technological visionaries? But obviously, this was an ill-founded assumption. I should have known better. As most of us would agree, meaning is elusive and socially constructed. The meaning of our words is elusive partly because individuals can use the same term and mean different things in kind and degree, depending on the context, and it's socially constructed in that we develop meaning or the sense of terms through our dialogue and experience with others in broad and narrow contexts of the world. What I mean by "independent writer" might not be what you mean. What I meant by "independent writer" fifteen years ago might not mean the same thing

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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 (including Works Cited). Please send files to the *WLN* website.

for me now. How I define the “independent writer” might depend on my audience (students vs. teachers, educators vs. politicians) and my rhetorical purpose, further complicating the matter. I couldn't help myself as this process of self-reflection gained momentum. As Dave Healy writes, “Writing center folks tend to be a self-analytical lot” (1).

This essay has two purposes. First, I want to encourage colleagues to reflect formally on most, if not all, of the key terms found in their own mission statements, online descriptions, assessments, training material, marketing documents, and, even boilerplate speeches. Other terms besides the “independent writer” might include “writing process,” “proofread,” “edit,” “feedback,” and so on, words that we often take for granted and that we need to clearly explain to the students we visit and who visit us. Though the definitions of each of these terms appear obvious or self-evident, sustained research and formal analysis may prove otherwise, showing both the striking and subtle similarities and differences in each of our conceptions of the words.

Second, I want to share a method for such a reflection, and I offer a narrative that illustrates my study of the open compound word (Jackson 5) “independent writer.” To guide my research and analysis, I appropriate contemporary lexicographic practice. Using lexicography's criteria for composing definitions, I examine the ways in which writing center stakeholders—scholars, writing center administrators, teachers, consultants, and students—define or use the term. From this analysis, I develop a comprehensive and flexible definition for my center and for other directors and consultants to work with and against as they define the term for themselves and their local constituents. The motivation for this essay is not to come up with the “definitive” definition. Rather, it is about a process of research and analysis that will reveal shared terminology as a means to construct a definition that might resonate with students and colleagues and that might contribute to the clarification of what we do at each of our institutions. After all, it appears we won't be able to “really get rid of” such a term (Healy 3), as a few have hoped, so we might as well take the lead on constructing the definition of a term with the words of particular stakeholders. In the end, I offer ways to use the working definition of an independent writer to market a writing center and to conduct a portion of consultant training.

A LEXICOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

Since this essay attempts to develop a working definition of “independent writer,” I borrowed partially from lexicography. Lexicography is the study and practice of defining words and compiling dictionaries, and I sought guidance from Howard Jackson's *Lexicography: An Introduction*. The methodology for this study borrows from the lexicographer's planning, data (collection), and methods stages. For the planning stage, I designated my primary audience: students at our school, which would remind me, for example, to limit jargon. Based on Jackson's description of the data stage, I focused on computer corpora, that is, writing center scholarship found in searchable online archives, writing center websites, and anonymous electronic surveys of teachers and students. Using this data, I felt confident I could gather the language and senses of the word among the various stakeholders who might encounter the eventual definition. For the method stage I was only concerned with the definition, “the major function of dictionaries” (86), not the word's pronunciation, etymology, and so on. A lexicographer tries to write definitions that “capture” the meaning, or sense, of a word (18). Word meaning has four aspects: denotation, or reference to something in the “real world” (15); connotation, or “often emotive” positive and negative associations (16); sense or semantic relations, such as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and meronymy (17); and collocation, or the “likelihood that two words will co-occur” (18). With these basic lexicographic concepts of planning, data, and method in mind, I discovered during my research and analysis common terms that I could employ to compose a definition that captures the meaning of the word and that would be persuasive or acceptable for most, if not all, of our constituents and those of other writing centers.

Using the four criteria of word meaning, I gathered data from writing center websites, writing center journal articles, and surveys. Websites and articles offered ready-made and easily searchable computer

corpora for a representative community of writing center administrators and scholars, while the surveys presented data of the terminology used by my primary and secondary audiences, out of which I could create my own computer corpus. Using Google and various combinations of the keywords “writing center,” “writing studio,” “writing lab,” “rhetoric and writing center,” and “independent writer,” I discovered twenty-four writing center websites of two- and four-year institutions that used the word. To discover what journal articles in writing center studies might implicitly or explicitly define the word, I searched the archived PDF files of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, the PDF files of the *Writing Center Journal* at The Writing Centers Research Project, and the HTML files of *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*. During this search, I found six articles that use the term. I distributed an online survey to the students who use our center’s services, the consultants who staff our center, and English department faculty members of our institution, who recommend the majority of students who come to us. One-hundred-seventeen students, five consultants, and eleven faculty members responded to the following prompt: “The goal of the writing center is to help [you/students] become an independent writer. What do you think ‘independent writer’ means?” With a popular spreadsheet application, I collated the words in the immediate vicinity of “independent writer(s)” that offered as a referent a “person, object, feeling, action, idea, quality, etc.—in the real world” (Jackson 15); that suggested positive or negative feelings or associations; that demonstrated a similar, opposite, “kind of,” or “part of” sense (17-18); and that appeared frequently with the word.

THE SENSES AND A WORKING DEFINITION

As one might expect, the results of analysis show that each group’s senses and aspects of the independent writer converge and diverge. The words that all the groups use to explicitly define or to implicitly describe the independent writer converge on positive mental states, inventory of knowledge, habits of the mind, awareness of the self, and emphasis on isolation. Regarding mental states that invite positive connotations, the groups say independent writers are confident, proud, fearless, and empowered. They possess knowledge about the strategies for invention, drafting, revision, proofreading, and editing. The minds of these writers are organized. According to the stakeholders, independent writers are people who can envision the “big picture” of writing assignments and can formulate, conceptualize, construct, or structure projects. Independent writers are self-aware, knowing their strengths and weaknesses. As they compose assignments, these kinds of writers find momentum from their strengths and know what to do to manage their weaknesses. And the final area of convergence includes the emphasis on isolation. Independent writers invent, draft, revise, proofread, and edit alone—rarely, if ever, seeking opportunities for collaboration.

The words each group uses to explicitly define or to implicitly describe the independent writer diverge from words to express concerns about the forms and goals of writing, the quality of written products, voice, audience, critical thinking and interpretation, research, and degree of collaboration. Students, writing center administrators, and scholars say the independent writer can write in many different forms or genres and for many goals, while consultants and faculty members are silent on the subject in my corpus. Students and consultants remark on the quality of the products independent writers produce, saying that their writing is good (sometimes perfect), purposeful, clear, concise, and error free, while faculty, administrators, and scholars are silent in the survey and literature. Voice and self-expression matter to students, faculty members, and scholars when the independent writer is mentioned, while I discovered that administrators exclude this concern on their writing center websites. Students and faculty mention that independent writers recognize their audience and compose work that engages and affects their readers, while consultants, administrators, and scholars exclude words that denote or connote this concern when presenting the term. When students, faculty, and administrators use or define the term, I often found the words “critical thinker” and “can interpret,” while these words were absent in the corpus for consultants and scholars. All the groups, except my representative consultants, mentioned something about independent writers’ abilities to suc-

“In addition to creating a checklist for marketing, curriculum planning, and critical reflection, the process of defining the keywords of our missions can lead to a partial assessment of consultant training.”

TAKE NOTE

MIDDLE EAST–NORTH AFRICA WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Nov. 16-17, 2012
Doha, Qatar
College of the North Atlantic
“*Creating a Culture
of Writing*”
Keynote speaker: Terry
Myers Zawacki

Contact the Conference Chair, Paula Hayden, for more information and for pre-registering via e-mail: awc@cna-qatar.edu.qa. For information about conference fees and hotel accommodations, see the Conference website: <http://menawca.org/12.html>.

NEBRASKA WRITING CENTER CONSORTIUM

Omaha, Nebraska
Clarkson College
Oct. 12, 2012
Guest speaker: Michael
Pemberton

Conference website: <http://www.clarksoncollege.edu/academics/professionaldevelopment/continuingeducationevents/>. For conference information, contact Katherine Kirkpatrick: KirkpatrickKatherine@clarksoncollege.edu; (402) 552-6117.

cessfully research and find resources. And in the final area of divergence—degree of collaboration—students and faculty members say independent writers mostly work alone, yet they must seek some feedback to test ideas and the quality of writing during most, if all, recurring stages of the writing process.

Based on these results of converging and diverging senses of the independent writer, I would like to offer a working definition, incorporating the terms that all these groups should recognize and find reasonable. After some words or phrases of the definition, I include in parentheses the lexicographic criterion that helped guide data collation, analysis of the results, and composing of the definition:

Independent writer: a person or a kind of writer (denotation, semantic relation) who is reasonably confident (connotation) about his or her ability to apply an array of strategies to the writing process stages of project planning, invention, drafting, revision, proofreading, and editing; who is aware of his or her strengths and weaknesses (connotation), finding momentum from strengths and strategies to accommodate weaknesses; and who takes sole responsibility for his or her writing and often works through the writing process alone (collocation), yet seeks some feedback to test ideas and the quality of writing during most, if all, recurring stages of the process.

The definition offers a reference to things in the real world, emotive associations, sense relation, and words found in collocation among the corpora. Since I synthesized this definition from the words of writing center stakeholders, it should be comprehensive enough to address most, if not all, of the senses of the word “independent writer” that would resonate to one degree or another with my primary and secondary audiences. The practical application of this definition, the initial reason for starting this study, is in marketing our center. But after my analysis of the corpus—discovering that my representative consultants’ senses of independent writer exclude concerns about the forms and goals of writing, audience, critical thinking and interpretation, and degree of collaboration—I can see that this process of defining a central tenet of the work we try to do at our writing center reveals potential gaps in my consultant training.

APPLYING THE DEFINITION TO MARKETING AND CONSULTANT TRAINING

Writing center administrators can apply the method of defining words and the comprehensive definition of *independent writer* I presented above (or one that they compose for their particular locales) to marketing and consultant training. First, administrators and consultants can use the definition as a presentation checklist or outline at the beginning of consultations for new clients and during classroom visits, orientations, and other student-centered events. Instead of stating the word in passing, as I did in the opening narrative, speakers of the word should give a definition and describe what the writing center does to address each major component of the definition. For example, to explain how we help students build confidence as an aspect of independent writer, we can explain, with Albert Bandura’s forces of developing self-efficacy in mind, how we model strategies of the writing process, allow students to master skills with consultant guidance, acknowledge successes and strengths, and offer a comfortable and inviting environment to help mitigate anxiety. To address the part of the definition that mentions strategies of the writing process, we would list one or two of them for each process stage, such as clustering and listing for invention, or reading aloud or reading “backwards” for proofreading. And we would continue like this, in brief, for each element of the definition. The definition becomes much more than a mantra that we invoke as a formality each time we speak the term. Rather, it becomes a productive tool of delivery that ties a writing center’s services into this mission or goal. The definition also becomes a clear, professional, and persuasive way to influence how “others see our missions, goals, and methods” (Simpson 4).

The second application of defining a word and the resultant definition is to consultant training. The specific applications include a curriculum checklist, a frame for critical reflection, and an assessment. As a checklist, similar to the marketing application, administrator-teachers can present the definition at the beginning of the semester in their peer writing consultation course, and for subsequent meetings they can show consultants how particular activities tie into the ultimate goal of developing independent writers. For example, most administrator-teachers conduct mock and real consultations during their class meetings. During the post-consultation reflection and

critique, students can analyze what part of the consultation reinforces an element of the definition. They might begin, “How did the consultant’s praise contribute to the development of the independent writer?” or “I noticed that the consultant showed the student how to use clustering with a topic outside of the student’s essay. How does that help develop the independent writer?” Besides using the definition as a critical frame during class, I can use the definition as a checklist for planning my syllabus calendar. As I lay out the activities and after I’ve written the calendar, I can review what activities support the senses of the independent writer. More than mantras, comprehensive definitions of our key tenets can become central to curriculum planning and reflective practice.

In addition to creating a checklist for marketing, curriculum planning, and critical reflection, the process of defining the keywords of our missions can lead to a partial assessment of consultant training. The process might uncover what consultants have acquired from training and what they are conscious of. At the same time, of course, the process might reveal what they have failed to retain, what they’ve ignored, or what might only lie at the unconscious level. If one of my major goals for our writing center is to develop independent writers, then, according to the above definition and the results of my analysis, the consultants at the writing center I direct are conscious of and, I assume, engage in activities during a consultation that create positive mental states, that offer strategies for the writing process (i.e., inventory of knowledge), promote various productive habits of the mind, encourage an awareness of the self, and help plan for the next step to write away from the writing center (i.e., emphasis on isolation). While the results of my analysis highlight what consultants are conscious of based on their training and experience, they concurrently suggest potential gaps in the course curriculum. The representative consultants are not conscious of helping students understand the forms and goals of writing, audience awareness, skills for critical thinking and interpretation, strategies for research, and plans for when to collaborate or gain feedback. As the definition can be used as a checklist to confirm that class activities and assignments support the ultimate goal of the independent writer, the results can be used in the same way.

Defining the keywords of our mission statements is more than just an exercise in self-analysis. The process of defining these words and the definition can produce the type of influence Jeanne Simpson advocates in “Whose Idea of a Writing Center Is This, Anyway?” To help influence students during class visits and other occasions, an inclusive definition, such as the “independent writer,” becomes a verbal checklist to present the services in an orderly fashion that supports a clearly stated goal. To help influence consultants, the definition can assist with making concrete connections between classroom practice and abstract goals. And by revealing the senses consultants possess about an administrator’s writing center goals, the lexicographic method and resultant definitions can influence the investigators themselves, to maintain the activities and assignments that clearly support the elements of the tenets and revise those that don’t. ♦

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Review of *I Hope I Join the Band* (cont. from p. 13)

through every chapter, in passing comments and in a few longer passages devoted to emotional processes. To get the flavor of what Condon can do, read pages 113-4 for a subtle description of how shame is different from guilt. The depth, clarity, and maturity of this writing is marvelous. Our community’s goal of creating a sustained dialogue about race and racism will require us to contend with emotions in ways that we haven’t before. Condon’s work is a significant contribution to that development. ♦

(Endnote)

1. See for example “Everyday Racism: Anti-Racism Work and Writing Center Practice” in *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* (Logan: Utah State UP, 2007); and “Beyond the Known: Writing Centers and the Work of Anti-Racism” in *Writing Center Journal* 27.2 (2007). ♦

ANNOUNCEMENTS

IWCA News

• *Writing Center Journal* Editorial Search

The International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) invites applications for editorial leadership (i.e., co-editors, editorial teams, single editors) of the *Writing Center Journal* (WCJ). For a copy of the criteria for application and other questions, contact any of the following:

- Selection Committee Chair, Jennifer Kunka (JKunka@fmarion.edu)
- IWCA President, Nathalie Singh-Corcoran (Nathalie.Singh-Corcoran@mail.wvu.edu)
- IWCA Past President, Roberta Kjesrud (Roberta.Kjesrud@wwu.edu)

Applications are due by October 15, 2012.

• IWCA Board Elections

Nominations are due by September 27, 2012, for the following IWCA board member positions: 1 community college, 1 secondary school, 1 graduate student, and 7 at-large representatives. Please consult <www.writingcenters.org> or contact IWCA Secretary Kerri Jordan at jordan01@mc.edu for more information. The election will be held electronically from October 11-18, 2012.

• IWCA Conference

Oct. 25-27, 2012
San Diego, CA

For information about registration, lodging, and the schedule, see the Conference website: <http://sandbox.socialwriting-centers.org/?page_id=32>.

INTERNATIONAL TUTORS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

◆ *Valerie Balester*
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX

In her 2008 keynote address to the International Writing Centers Association, Nancy Grimm suggested that writing centers actively seek out international, multilingual tutors in order to prepare our students (and our monolingual tutors) for the multilingual world of the 21st century. At the University Writing Center at Texas A&M, we have employed international tutors (and a few native multilinguals) for many years. International tutors have been instrumental in helping us effectively address the concerns of non-English speaking international clients and learn about teaching English as a foreign language; and they have helped us fashion a diversity statement and think more critically about difference. In this essay, I briefly describe our international staff, explain some of the advantages they bring us, and provide evidence of their effectiveness.

THE TUTORS

For this article, I focus on non-native English-speaking graduate students, those who attended high school outside the United States, and their contributions to our center over the past nine years, that is, since our founding. Although we have employed international undergraduates who attended high school in this country and who are bilingual (from Canada, China, India, Russia, Nigeria, Mexico, Portugal), and although they have also contributed to our linguistic diversity initiative, the students I discuss here are distinct because of their cultural expectations in regards to schooling and literacy (Leki). They are more often perceived as different and are less likely to be employed as tutors or teachers of writing in American institutions of learning. I would include undergraduate tutors who went to high school in another country if in fact we had employed any; however, the only one to date attended school in English-speaking Canada. Only graduate-level internationals have applied for our tutoring positions.

We have employed sixteen graduate tutors from Serbia, India, Malaysia, Taiwan, China, Japan, and Korea, in fields of study that include construction management, communications, education, linguistics, medical journalism, and English. Up until two years ago we had an agreement with the English department to assign us students who wanted to work on their oral English skills before facing a composition class. Eight out of sixteen international hires came to us this way. We knew these tutors would have many opportunities to speak English in our center, and we allowed them to take as long as they needed before tutoring solo. Most were ready in a month or less. They worked with us for a year and left more prepared to teach and with more confidence in their speaking. Unfortunately, the practice has been temporarily halted because budget cuts have forced a reduction in teaching staff in the English department.

In addition to online and one-to-one sessions, all our international tutors conduct classroom workshops in undergraduate classes across campus, putting them front and center as experts on writing and public speaking. Public roles like these showcase their capability (and of course use their talents) and subvert the belief that English belongs to native speakers. Their presence as writing tutors and classroom workshop leaders sends the message to students and faculty that knowledge of writing and public speaking is not something one owns simply by virtue of citizenship, but rather earns by study. By involving our international tutors fully in everything we do, we convey to the university community and to our writing center staff that they are fully capable participants in all writing center work. Masha, for example, has been a tutor through both her M.A. and Ph.D. programs, for six years. She is an Assistant Director who takes many responsibilities, for example, teaching courses for the Honors Council on plagiarism, preparing our annual fall staff development day for new tutors, writing training materials, and assisting with the undergraduate tutor course. She, Anisah, and Marisa have served or are serving as team leaders, meaning they supervise and mentor six to seven other tutors. Dragana recently led our graduate tutoring seminar.

Besides serving as a team leader, Anisah has been an active writing assistant (our term for a course-linked tutor working with a writing-intensive class) for a senior-level poultry science class and a sophomore-level computer science class (both taught by an international professor, coincidentally). All the consultants worked as receptionists when needed, and Marisa and Anisah worked as night supervisors. Tony, Masha, Dragana, Marisa, and Yonggi all attended and presented at writing center conferences.

WHAT INTERNATIONAL TUTORS OFFER

Besides offering what every good tutor does—dedication, talent, and knowledge about writing—international tutors contribute something more to the center: they bring a different perspective and serve as resources for knowledge about language.

- *A different perspective.* Because of their peer relationship and close contact with other tutors, international tutors change the tenor of our center; their accents, their life stories, their explanations of customs, holidays, or rituals, their questions about our culture, the food they offer at gatherings, all remind us that the world is not confined to the United States. Some of them bring a new view of schooling or literacy learning or a new way to approach academic genres. Sometimes they notice things others don't. At one staff meeting, Dragana protested when American tutors unwittingly made a joke about a demanding student portrayed as an international tutee. Her protest, which was sobering (and brave), encouraged critical dialogue and reflection about how we approach our tutoring and pushed our tutors to consider how they sometimes stereotype tutees. In another instance, Joori sparked questions from tutors who observed her using Korean in consultations; they thought this might be against our policy and that it might provide the tutee with less practice in English, an assumption that led to an opportunity to discuss how tutoring can be just as effective in another language for some situations.

- *Resource for knowledge about language.* As Williams and Severino point out, while American tutors may be good writers, they sometimes lack the metalanguage of grammar to explain what learners of English as a foreign language require. This feeling of not knowing enough, which often contributes to frustration for tutors working with international tutees, has been documented in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* (Crowley; Hiller; Willis). Having studied English as a foreign language (at least in most cases), our international tutors know grammar and often, too, know how to explain it. Some, especially those with a background in teaching English as a Foreign Language or English for Academic Purposes, have shared this knowledge in our center, either working peer-to-peer with other tutors, in staff meetings, or in tutor classes. As an added bonus, when tutor and tutee share proficiency in a language other than English, international tutors can create a bridge into academic English, an option not available to monolingual tutors.

Our tutors appreciate that international tutors can serve as a resource on language issues; for example, they indicated—in anonymous end-of-the-year evaluations—that they highly valued presentations at staff development meetings conducted by international tutors. Over the years, Gina and Tony presented one on working with international tutees; Yonggi and Anisah conducted one on teaching articles; and Dragana conducted one on teaching pronunciation using the International Phonetic Alphabet. In that case, Dragana explained not only how and why we can teach pronunciation, but also why cultural conditioning makes it difficult for us to hear sounds that are not used in our native language. Gina's supervisor noted in her annual review that Gina used her presentation as an opportunity to collaborate with other tutors: "When Dr. Balester asked Gina to present on ESL, she accepted immediately and coordinated with other students to give everyone important information. She worked many hours to ensure the presentation was a success." The same evaluator also remarked on how Gina served as a resource: "Gina has provided tremendous ESL-related support at the Writing Center this semester. When tutors have issues with international students, they will often seek her advice." Our international student seminars, which tutors conduct weekly to provide cultural information on genres and writing (resumes, interviews, dissertations), were inspired by Gina and Masha, who created an international conversation course one semester based on discussing popular American television shows.

TAKE NOTE

SOUTHEASTERN WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATION

Feb. 21-23, 2013
Fort Lauderdale, FL
Nova Southeastern University
“*The Work We Do*”
Keynote: Melissa lanetta

Conference Chairs are Kevin Dvorak and Shanti Bruce. Information about suggested topics for proposals and other details are available on the Conference website: <<http://www.iwca-swca.org/Conferences.html>>; Facebook: <<http://www.facebook.com/southeastern-writingcenterassociation>>; Twitter: #swca2013. For further information, contact Kevin Dvorak: kdvorak@nova.edu. CFP deadline is Oct. 22, 2012.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION AND THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE ASSOCIATION—PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Oct. 12-13, 2012
Highline Community College
Des Moines, WA
“*Horizons*”
Keynote speaker: Joseph Janangelo

Website: <<http://www.tyca-pnw.org/node/160>>.

International tutors Gina and Tony were also influential in creating the current seminar, explaining why a basic grammar class was not needed. Dragana, Masha, and Anisah have all been active supporters of the seminar and have been helpful to the undergraduate moderators.

EFFECTIVENESS

Students visiting the Writing Center have seldom questioned the authority of international tutors, a fact that I attribute to their faith that the Writing Center views them as capable tutors. To be sure that my impressions were accurate, however, I reviewed yearly staff evaluations and the anonymous exit surveys completed by students to compare international tutors with American tutors. I examined the yearly evaluations for all sixteen international tutors and looked at all open-ended comments on exit surveys for international tutors who worked with us from 2008-2011, that is, 173 surveys for nine tutors. (Keep in mind that most students do not provide comments on the exit surveys.) From this perspective, the tutors, native and non-native speakers of English, look very much the same, mostly highly positive. The examples below show a range of positive comments coming from both American and international tutees. Each is about a different international tutor:

From a graduate student in industrial engineering: “I really should give credit to the person who helped me on this particular appointment. She was fascinating! She helped technically and brought with her material to show me (so she also did her research about what I asked!). In few words, I am highly thankful to her for putting order in my writing!”

From an international graduate student in education: “She is very professional and friendly. Most importantly, she encouraged me to find out and correct the errors by myself and helped me to summarize my common problems.”

From a senior biology major: “I read my essay out loud while he listened and stopped after each paragraph. He had great contributions in both wording, ideas, and grammar. It was definitely one of my best experiences . . . very kind and helpful . . . whoever doesn’t use this is just naive and or lazy.”

From a first year English major: “I needed help with my thesis statement and the consultant was able to help me form one that I could go back and revise if I need to.”

There were negative comments (although they were not many). Very often they were the same sort of negative comment one gets for any tutor: not having specific expertise, such as in science writing; not paying enough attention to the session; not finding enough mistakes or finding too many; refusing to proofread—in short, the usual. More notable are those comments which seem to stem from the international status of the tutor. However, it is important to note that positive comments far outweigh these few negative comments. In fact, in the comments from 2008 to 2011 for all international tutors, the five listed below were the only comments of this nature. Two of them concerned one tutor:

From a senior in sports management: “It was hard to understand his accent at times and I just feel that he didn’t really help me very much. Except for answering a couple questions I had, the experience was a waste of my time.”

From an international graduate student in history: “She was so rude. English is not my mother language, and this is only my second semester in US. However, she talked like I am a fool because of my English. It was VERY UNPLEASANT experience. Also, I could not understand her weird pronunciation.”

From a junior in agricultural economics: “I could not clearly understand what the person was saying and [they] did not give me much feedback on the content of my paper, which is what I made the appointment for.”

NEWS

From a junior in international studies: “she . . . was unable to communicate how to improve my essay because she literally did not know how to put it into words. When I asked for a clarification she would drop the subject. This particular appointment I told her three separate times the reason for my appointment and the subject matter of my essay.”

From a graduate international student in chemistry: “The person was an International and it was little bit hard to communicate. Furthermore, I strongly think that the consultant should be well versed in English to help students and that a native English speaker will be ideal.”

While the last comment, from an international student who prefers to work with a native speaker, probably reflects the opinion of more than this one student, it does not appear to be the majority opinion by any means. And while it can be said that an occasional student takes issue with an international tutor’s pronunciation, it is not the norm.

The exit surveys include Likert-scale questions. I compared the scores, and again they seemed similar for international and other tutors. In addition to reviewing the surveys in general, I looked specifically at one of the least experienced of the international tutors, one who was with us for only one year and who was mentioned twice in the negative comments. I isolated the scores on the item “I was satisfied with my consultation.” Out of 73 responses, 4 strongly disagreed, 4 disagreed, 6 were neutral, 19 agreed, and 40 strongly agreed. For comparison, the scores for an American tutor who had 70 responses (and two years’ experience) broke down as follows: 3 strongly disagreed, 3 disagreed, 3 were neutral, 25 agreed, and 36 strongly agreed. This strongly suggests that the international tutors on average perform as well as their American counterparts.

The inclusion of international tutors has always been one of our most effective practices and has pushed us toward the twenty-first century multilingual, multicultural writing center that Grimm envisions, one where “multilingualism rather than mono-lingualism” is the “conceptual norm” (17). With about 25 percent of our clientele being international, international tutors help us remember to focus on diversity and be sensitive to other cultures. They also inform our tutoring by providing us with language resources we would otherwise lack. However, they help us more broadly, as well, to recognize that, no matter our country of origin or our native language, when we tutor we serve as “mediators” (Grimm, 22) and “cultural informants” (Powers 373) for all students struggling to communicate across media, languages, audiences, and genres. ♦

Postscript

One of our former international tutors, Gina, has started a writing center in Taiwan. The consultants are Taiwanese graduate students in Teaching English as a Second Language.



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What’s New with WLN?

New WLN Staff

WLN is delighted to welcome our new staff members:

- Alan Benson, the Director of the Center for Writing Excellence at the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire, is the *WLN* Development Editor. He’s responsible for all those interesting, highly readable posts that you’ve been retweeting and sharing on our Twitter and Facebook pages (web addresses on p. 11). He also developed our international blog, “Connecting Writing Centers across Borders” for writing centers in countries other than the U.S. (See the URL for this blog below.)

- Lee Ann Glowzinski, completing her doctoral studies at Duquesne University, is our Assistant Development Editor, who has been organizing our complex traffic flow of manuscripts, reviewers, etc.

New International Writing Center Blog



“Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders” is a blog intended for people in writing centers around the world to share blog entries, photos, questions, resources, and comments about topics relevant to their work. There is a link on the *WLN* home page, or connect directly to it at <<https://www.writinglabnewsletter.org/blog/>>.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

a.m. CONFERENCE FOR HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CENTER TUTORS, DIRECTORS, AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

The Northern Virginia Writing Project, George Mason University, and Fairfax County Public Schools announce a one-day conference.

Friday, October 12, 2012 from 7:30 a.m.– 2:00 p.m.
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Schools in the Virginia, Maryland and D.C. area (or beyond if you want to travel!) are invited to attend. For further information, please e-mail oaktonwc@gmail.com. Official payment and registration begins in September. More information is available on the NVWP site: <http://nvwp.org/2012/06/06/save-the-date-for-the-2012-high-school-writing-center-conference/>.

BOOK REVIEW

Greenfield, Laura, and Karen Rowan, eds. *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2011. (314 pp.; paper \$29.95; e-book \$24)

◆ Jackie Grutsch McKinney
Ball State University
Kokomo, IN

This is an honest book, and if I'm being honest, I'll admit that I began this book with some hesitation. A few years ago, there was a campaign on my campus against hate, symbolized by the word "hate" in a circle with a line striking through it in the same way a no-smoking sign bisects a cigarette. The organizers cajoled students and faculty, administrators, and staff to sign a giant banner with the symbol as a campus-wide declaration of our stance against hate. No matter that they prominently hung the banner, the lasting effect was null. Who isn't against hate? Who can't sign a banner? So while I was eager to read a collection full of writing by scholars I admire, I was afraid the book would be in that same vein of toothless multicultural, anti-hate rhetoric that no one can disagree with, but that does not motivate a deeper consciousness or a change in behavior. However, I soon realized that *Writing Centers and the New Racism* is not that kind of book. I believe, instead, that this book will provoke change in thinking and practice.

In the introduction, editors Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan describe the impetus for the project and set the tone for the rest of the collection. In Victor Villanueva's 2005 address to the IWCA/NCPTW conference, he described the "new racism" that manifests in evasion and silence on issues of race rather than the violence and blatant discrimination of older racism (though that sort of racism still happens and part of the new racism is a tendency to deny or feign shock when it does happen). Following this speech, the editors wanted to see a sustained dialogue on race in writing center work. Instead, the editors observed a failure of those involved to take up Villanueva's charge in their scholarship or even on the WCenter listserv. They note, "many scholars, directors, teachers, and tutors consider issues of race and racism to be 'strange or tangential' to the education system, broadly, and to writing center work, specifically" (5). The collection aims to show how writing centers are not race-neutral sites of literacy instruction and how racism lurks in the unexamined core of writing center praxis. Though contemporary readers might expect that a book "on diversity" will or should make a nod to other groups facing discrimination based on sex, sexuality, class, religion, ability, nationality or what have you, *Writing Centers and the New Racism* maintains its particular focus on race. As Villanueva says, it is a trope of the new racism to subsume race into a larger discussion of discrimination in order to avoid talking about race specifically. Though I think the other *-isms* are overdue for discussion in writing center circles too, I appreciated that this collection maintained its singular focus.

After the introduction, the fourteen chapters of the book are arranged into four sections: one focused on theory, one on praxis, one containing empirical studies, and one with accounts of personal, lived experiences. The effect of these different types of arguments juxtaposed is a rhetorical blitzkrieg; no matter one's epistemological leanings, the collection persuades on all fronts. Even so, the overall message is polyvocal—there is no party line here. Authors make concrete connections by alluding to others in the collection, but also overlap in dissonant ways. This approach is well-characterized in Anne Geller, Frankie Condon, and Meg Carroll's chapter as they write, "we realize that the aim is not absolute knowledge, not the containment of error, and not the revolutionary eradication of racism or any other form of oppression (a hopeless purpose, we fear), but an unrelenting, unremitting willingness to revise our assumptions, our perceptions, our analyses, our critiques, and our practices in service of the possibility of more fully realized humanity—our own and others" (122).

Though none of the authors would suggest that being of a racial minority comes with an innate critical race consciousness, the book is written more directly to white readers who because of their white privilege may think less about race in their daily lives. Should one come to this collection with the illusion that it was not

written for one's own enlightened, progressive self, one will not likely maintain this illusion very long. Perhaps nowhere else is this more true than in Greenfield's "The 'Standard English' Fairy Tale" where she explicitly calls for "progressive" teachers and tutors to pay attention:

If most educators allow their unchecked racism to guide their beliefs about language, it stands to reason that the teaching and tutoring practices long advocated in the fields of composition and rhetoric and writing center studies that are premised on these attitudes are necessarily racist, too. Included in this indictment are those contemporary pedagogies—especially those contemporary pedagogies—celebrated by those of us who fancy ourselves 'progressive' in the world of teaching and tutoring writing (35).

What common, contemporary writing center practices are implicated in the collection? Many, including:

Teaching Standard English as a tool for success. Perhaps a commonplace in writing center studies is the premise that Standard English is not better than other varieties of English, but Standard English is the master's tool, and as such, we can empower students by helping them toward facility with it. Greenfield, however, in "The 'Standard English' Fairy Tale" contests the idea that there is a "Standard English" and argues that the choice to tutor to that standard for student success is a decision embedded in a racist understanding of language and literacy (an idea that surely would be contested by scholars such as Lisa Delpit who argue just the opposite). She writes, "what is important to recognize is that 'Standard English' is not a quantifiable dialect with a finite set of rules and features; in contrast, 'Standard English' is a qualifier ascribed to many ways of speaking by privileged white people or, perhaps more accurately, any variety of English that has not been associated historically with resistance by communities of color" (43). Further, she notes, "it is not the language which causes listeners to make assumptions about the speaker, but the attitudes held by the listeners toward the speaker that cause them to extend that attitude towards the speaker's language" (Greenfield 50). Greenfield suggests, at minimum, we might use the term "Standardized Englishes" instead "to make visible the fact that humans actively select which Englishes will be privileged" (43).

Teaching code switching. As a way to value home dialects, some writing center and composition scholars have advocated for code-switching: teaching students when to switch from their home dialect into (an assumed to be more appropriate) academic dialect. Stanley Fish, for one, suggests in his *New York Times* piece "What Should Colleges Teach?" that students should switch into Standard English at school and make any code switching decisions when out of school, an idea that Vershawn Ashanti Young confronts in his chapter, "Should Writers Use They Own English?" Young argues that, in fact, "we all us in a common language" (63), and that a more appropriate stance would be an understanding of code meshing, "the new code switching; it's multi-dialecticism and plural-lingualism in one speech act, in one paper" (67). Young provides several examples to substantiate that we all code mesh already. He writes, "The BIG divide between vernacular and standard, formal and informal, be eroding if it ain't already faded" (69).

Teaching with minimalist, individual instruction to foster independence (a.k.a. "better writers, not better writing"). In "Rethorizing Writing Center Work to Transform a System of Advantage Based on Race," Nancy Grimm cuts right to the heart of contemporary writing center practices that foreground "helping" individual writers. She states "my claim is that [Condon's set of suggestions] will be insufficient to the task of challenging white racial privilege if writing center work stays rooted in the theories of learning that take the individual as the starting point" (80). For Grimm, structural, covert racism goes unnoticed when we direct our gaze at one student at a time, which is problematic considering nothing is more central to writing center work than working with the student in front of us in the one-to-one tutorial. Grimm cautions readers to rethink even those practices that appear like common sense: "it doesn't matter whether strongly-prejudiced or generous-hearted people work in writing centers, the unchallenged or common-sense mottos that guide writing center practice allow structural forms of racism to continue" (83). So, although tutors at Grimm's center still work with one student at a time, they put an end to rules that supposedly foster student independence like always having tutors read aloud or forbidding tutors from holding pens.

Teaching a unit on race in tutor training courses. I would guess that it is pretty common for race to be on the agenda of tutor training courses or staff education agendas. Yet many of us, I'd also guess, subscribe to

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Tweet WLN? "Like" WLN?

If your writing center and/or tutors have Twitter accounts and/or Facebook pages, we invite you to "follow," "tweet," "like," and/or "post" on our Twitter account and Facebook wall. We occasionally post photos from writing center websites for everyone else to enjoy, so if you have a photo or maybe a particularly useful resource on your website (e.g., an online tutor's manual, a PowerPoint, etc.), let us know. We also invite you to post occasional comments about what's going on in your writing center and also links that other writing center folk would be interested in.



@WLNewsletter



Writing Lab Newsletter

For those of you who are in writing centers in countries other than the United States, the blog "Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders" offers you a space to post pictures of your center, offer comments, ask questions, list resources, and discuss whatever writing center matters you want to blog about. Blog away! (The URL is on p. 9.)

2011–2012 WLN Reviewers

We offer heartfelt gratitude to our reviewers, who take time from their overloaded schedules to read submissions sent to *WLN* and, drawing on their scholarship as they read, respond with thoughtful reviews designed to help writers and ensure that the articles meet *WLN* standards. With thanks and appreciation, we list the names of this year's reviewers on the *WLN* website. Click on the link to this list at the bottom of the home page: <www.writinglabnewsletter.org>.

an approach that Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan call the “week twelve approach” in the sixth chapter in the collection. The idea is that for one week out of fifteen, near the end of the term, race is the “topic” for exploration (132). “When we leave race out of the discussion,” or delay such a discussion till late in the semester, Greenfield and Rowan write, “we allow tutors the opportunity to remain unmindful of how their writing advice may be racially biased” (130). Instead, Greenfield and Rowan suggest a radical redefinition of staff education that foregrounds an interrogation of institutional power.

Accommodating difference. In the chapter “Diversity as Topography,” Katherine Valentine and Mónica Torres write about language in official IWCA statements that express an intention to “welcome and accommodate” diversity, a move the authors claim that situates diversity or difference as a “problem to be solved” (193). Instead, writing center professionals ought to draw on the research that shows the contrary: diversity is not a problem. The authors point to research showing the cognitive benefits of diversity (197) and the authors’ own student survey participants who “resisted our assertions of race and racism as prevalent forces in contemporary culture” (200). I can attest to engaging in each of these five common, contemporary writing center practices; I’m confident other readers will see their own practices reflected here as well. Luckily, the book does not stop at critique; the various authors offer alternative theories to reinvigorate our practices: Greenfield and Rowan offer critical pedagogy; Grimm discusses a community of practice framework; Geller, Condon, and Carroll suggest a “usable shame” can help dislodge our learned patterns; and Moira Ozias and Beth Godbee highlight principles of organizing for antiracist ends. Yet, the authors individually and collectively avoid suggesting that systemic problems have quick or easy solutions. The empirical research and the lived experience sections in particular reveal the messiness—a word used in many of the chapters—of antiracist work. (I am haunted by Barbara Gordon’s chapter in which she details the fallout following teaching about African American Vernacular English [AAVE] even now, a month after first reading it.)

Though there is much to like in this collection, I did wonder about the choice not to include the Villanueva IWCA/NCPTW speech that ignited this collection and served as an important touchstone for many of the chapters. Readers can find a copy of the speech in the *Writing Center Journal* archives, but it would have been helpful to have it reprinted here (more so, actually, than the chapter by Villanueva that is included). A part of me also worries that the tone set in the introduction by the editors is a bit self-righteous. I want this collection to be bold, and it is. I just am afraid they might be too directive about how the conversation on race should play out. They write that their collection is “reminder and proof that indeed our professional community is full of antiracists eager to effect change” (12), yet, then, they write about the inability of writing center folks to sustain a conversation on race. They also disclose that some contributors dropped out of the collection rather than revise according to their directive, extended feedback (12). As a reader who wants to enter into this very important conversation, moments like this make me feel that if and when I try to join in, someone will tell me that I’m doing it wrong. I don’t think that’s the invitation the editors mean to extend. Despite these concerns, I think that Greenfield and Rowan have achieved the goals for their collection. They wanted to “be bold in [their] engagement with hard questions” (9), and I hope along with the editors that they will “incite meaningful momentum toward future conversations about race and writing centers” in the coming months and years (10). Writing center tutors and administrators should read this book and use it to prompt and sustain on-going conversations about the intersections of race and writing and writing centers. ♦

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BOOK REVIEW

Condon, Frankie. *I Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation and Antiracist Rhetoric*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2012. (210 pp., paper \$26.95; e-book \$22.00)

Frankie Condon, who is the faculty coordinator of the writing center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has published several influential texts addressing racism and anti-racist work in writing centers.¹ Condon’s new book, *I Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation and Antiracist Rhetoric* covers some similar ground, but it approaches the topic from a different, and decidedly more personal angle. In this new text, Condon explores ways of thinking that can yield insights about internalized racism. The introduction and the first four chapters offer a mix of personal stories, history, and theory drawn from a broad range of texts related to race studies. The final chapter reproduces a series of letters exchanged between Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young, in which they ruminate on some of the themes addressed earlier in the book.

Overall, Condon argues that confronting racism requires us to change how we think—how we understand ourselves, and the people and institutions around us; how we understand the personal, social, and political histories that brought us to this place; and how we imagine our futures. I found some aspects of the argument, and of the overall organization of the book, to be frustrating, and I suspect other readers will too. But the valuable aspects of this book outweigh the frustrations, and *I Hope I Join the Band* is well worth reading.

Because of Condon’s previous publications, and because of her prominent role in our community, I assumed that this book would be “about” writing centers in some way. It isn’t. Apart from cameo appearances by a couple of writing center

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directors, and passing references to writing center conferences, writing center work is not explicitly addressed. This doesn't mean that Condon's arguments couldn't be extended to a writing center context—they certainly can—but in this book Condon declines to make those connections explicit. This is curious, because I believe she wrote this book with a writing center—or writing studies—audience in mind. (I say this because of what the book treats as “new” information that requires explanation, and what she treats as familiar information, requiring none.) In any case, readers should be aware that this book does not speak explicitly to the specific concerns of writing centers.

The most important concept in Condon's argument is “whiteness,” which she describes as an implicit set of beliefs that presume the rightness of white people's experiences and understandings of the world. Whiteness, she says, quoting Marilyn Frye, “generally consider themselves to be benevolent and goodwilled, fair, honest and ethical,” and they “have a staggering faith in their own rightness and goodness” (34). The difficulty of persuading people to engage in and with antiracist activism is that doing so requires them to question those deep belief structures. If we discover that others perceive our actions as racist, our first response is to defend our intentions—I didn't mean it that way!—and that defensive reaction can easily derail any further exploration. Condon personifies whiteness as a “sucking force”—ubiquitous and almost impossible to disrupt—and as a trickster figure, always sneaking back into our thoughts if we let down our guard.

Condon believes that white people “never get a free pass through whiteness” (35); thus for her, the work of antiracism is fundamentally about cultivating ways of thinking that allow us to recognize and challenge whiteness thinking. But how exactly does one learn to think differently? The book offers two different approaches, one of which is, in my view, much more productive than the other. Unfortunately, it's the less productive approach that gets the most air time.

One approach—the less successful one—involves identifying “ways of thinking” that can produce new insights about internalized race and racism. Condon describes a series of five such ways of thinking, and these become the anchors for her chapters. Thus, chapter two addresses “critical, creative and pursuant ideation”; chapter three addresses “de-centering,” and chapter four addresses “nuancing.” The problem for me was that I couldn't see how knowing about these concepts would necessarily lead me to think differently. This may be because the concepts themselves are quite difficult to understand, at least as they are presented here. Creative ideation is defined as “the ability to form thoughts about worlds not yet seen by building upon, but not being limited by, history and lived experience” (47), while nuancing is “the practice of pursuing an idea, organizing concept or belief both through its historical and intellectual genealogy and through individual and collective memory and lived experience” (86). I can imagine the terms working as categories—for example, I could imagine having a thought and later saying, “Aha! That was an example of nuancing”—but the goal here is about creating, not categorizing.

But meanwhile, in and around the explanations of these five concepts, Condon models an approach to thinking differently that is based on storytelling, and this approach is both intuitive and compelling. Throughout the book, Condon tells stories, mostly drawn from her personal life. These brief narratives are spliced into the chapters in ways that reflect on and focus the theoretical discussions. But what she does with the stories is the key: she initially tells a story one way, and then circles back to tell it another way, sometimes from a different perspective, sometimes from a different starting point. Through this process of telling and retelling, what began as a simple story becomes an open-ended and layered narrative that reveals how race is written onto our lives and into our thinking.

For example, the central story concerns Condon's brother, who was born to an Ojibwe mother and adopted by Condon's white parents as part of the Indian Adoption Project. She first tells the adoption story from the perspective of her parents, for whom the narrative began with their wish for a child and was fundamentally about building a family. She then retells the story as a “captive narrative,” beginning with and connected to a long history of U.S. government programs that intervened in and disrupted Native American family lives. Finally, she extends the story into her and her brother's adulthood, so that we can see the development and implications of the events that came before. Condon explores these differing angles with patience, clarity, and bracing honesty. The result is a single story, with more than one beginning and end. It is also a story where the gaps and contradictions among the various perspectives are left wide open and deliberately unresolved, and where more than one truth is admitted into evidence. These are stories that resist whiteness by challenging the reflexive silences that we habitually impose on the role of race and racism in our lives.

I wish that Condon had used the idea of resistant storytelling (rather than the five “ways of thinking”) as the chapter structure, and that she had allowed her discussion of the process of writing these stories to expand. This approach to storytelling seems like an accessible and powerful tool for generating new knowledge and awareness of whiteness. And for the writing center/writing studies community (if we are, indeed, the intended audience,) it holds particular appeal. It's writerly, for one thing, and it speaks directly to the revision and rethinking practices that characterize writing center pedagogy. Crafting resistant stories could be a method for understanding not just how individuals are raced, but also how writing centers, and academic writing pedagogies are raced, as well how our work implicates us in racial oppression and how we might challenge racism in our professional roles. I could imagine writing center directors and tutors engaging in this work—alone or in groups, face-to-face or at a distance.

Condon's extended discussion of whiteness and her depiction of resistant storytelling are two of the reasons that I find this book valuable. A third reason is its richly nuanced presentation of the lived emotional experience of confronting racism. Condon is brilliant—there is no other word—at writing about emotions, drawing on her own experiences as well as on critical writings of other scholars. I found little gems of emotional clarity seeded

(continued on p. 5)

TUTOR'S COLUMN

LEARNING TO APPRECIATE THE FACULTY CONSULTATION

◆Barrie E. Olson
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Louisville, KY

When I look at the appointment book and see that my next appointment is with a faculty member, I cringe with dread. Anything is better than a faculty member—the composition student bitter about attending a mandatory writing center session, the ELL student who doesn't understand a lot of English, or even the graduate student working on a bio-chem dissertation. Yes, anything but a faculty member. I don't believe the dread I have of the faculty consultation is unfounded or unique. Many of us have probably encountered uncomfortable situations when working with faculty. Consider two of mine:

Experience 1

Professor X has requested an appointment with me. I do not personally know him, but I know he thinks highly of the Writing Center because his students are frequent clients each semester. I introduce myself and begin the session.

“How can I help you today?” I ask.

“Well, I'm getting ready to submit this article to “Leading Journal in the Field” and would like your help making sure there are no embarrassing typos or errors.”

I freeze. Dare I break the golden rule of writing centers—Thou shalt not edit?

Experience 2

Professor Y is attending her very first Writing Center appointment. She works in the Biology Department (I am an English graduate student) and is here to discuss a grant proposal.

“How can I help you today?” I ask.

“Well, I'm applying for this grant, and it is very important that I get this right. This is my first grant proposal.”

“I see. Do you have specific concerns about what you have so far?”

“Having never written a grant proposal before, I'm afraid I may have done it incorrectly. That's why I'm here.”

I freeze. If she were a student, the response would be easy. I've never written a grant proposal either, but let's do some research together and see if we can find some examples. But she is not a student. Dare I allude to the fact that I have never seen, let alone tutored, a grant proposal? I know even less than she does.

HANDLING THE FACULTY CONSULTATION

Situations like these certainly arise for student tutors working with university faculty. Working with faculty means wearing tutor hats most of us are uncomfortable with. For example, this means being more assertive than we'd be with students. In an ideal world, as Michael A. Pemberton states, “the tutor's very ignorance of discipline-specific subject matter and rhetorical conventions . . . can be seen as an equalizing force in writing center conferences” because tutors are less directive (124). When we aren't sure of what an assignment calls for, we must instead rely on the student's interpretation. As such, the consultation becomes student-centered rather than tutor-centered. And yet, admitting to such uncertainties with faculty members can cast us as unable to truly help, as not being “expert” enough.

Despite the discomfort that may arise in faculty consultations, knowing how to handle them is essential to our success as tutors. More importantly, looking forward to these situations is essential to the success of our writing centers. Margaret Garner explains that “writing center work is accomplished in collaboration with both faculty and students” (para. 2). By tutoring faculty, Garner states, we “remove the stigma that the writing center is a place for poor writers, a place primarily for remediation” (para. 3). Surely, if a tenured faculty member is attending the writing center, any student can benefit from it. Additionally, if faculty have a positive experience at the writing center, they will encourage their students to attend it as well. Indeed, what better way for faculty to understand what it is we do than for them to experience it first-hand?

And yet, these are the very reasons why the faculty consultation can be so hard on tutors. Garner suggests that if tutors model writing center consultations, faculty will be better prepared to explain to students what it is we do. But what happens when what the faculty member wants from his consultation (for example, editing) isn't actually our primary concern? The first time a professor asked me to proofread an article, I was lost. Should I explain that the writing center has a policy against solely proofreading the paper and send this professor on his not-so-merry way? That seemed unproductive. I could take the easy route and just proofread the paper. But what message would that send? Would this professor then encourage his students to have their papers proofread at the Writing Center before turning them in? How would I explain the sudden appearance of fifty college freshmen looking to have their papers edited? In the end, I settled on this: I would be happy to look at your paper for typos and errors. Would it be okay if I also shared any content-based thoughts or questions that come up? The professor smiled. Sure. Why not? And just like that, I was back in my comfort zone and the session went like any other. Did I focus on grammar and syntax more than I would in a normal session? Probably. But I didn't just focus on those issues. Rather, I modeled a typical session by asking questions about content that was unclear to me and by discussing the particular kind of text the professor was writing. As a result, the session was very productive. Not only did the faculty member receive valuable feedback on his piece of writing while being exposed to a typical writing consultation, but I had the opportunity to work with and learn from an expert on a type of writing that was never taught in my specific discipline but which I saw frequently in the Writing Center.

There is a similar benefit to appropriately handling the second experience described above. The first time I saw a grant proposal, I panicked. My first thought was to fake it. Sure, I can help you with this grant proposal. But that only made me more panicky. What if I led this professor astray due to my lack of genre-specific knowledge? My next thought was to abandon the session altogether. You know, I've never seen a grant proposal before. You should meet with another tutor who has. But that wouldn't work either. Rescheduling the appointment meant losing valuable time. I settled on this: You know, I've never seen a grant proposal before, but I know where to look to find examples, and then together you and I can go through and discuss any changes you feel you should make based on that. Was the professor thrilled with this approach? Not entirely. She was in a hurry and just wanted it done. Even so, in taking this approach, I had nothing to lose. As a professional in the field, the professor did not know the conventions of a genre specific to her discipline. Given that, it was acceptable for me to be unfamiliar with it too.

We thus started the session by getting on a computer and searching online for sample grant proposals. Once we had three that she felt were representative of what she was working on, we compared them. Though each proposal had nuanced differences, the professor was able to establish commonalities among all of them. We noted these elements and then returned to her proposal to see if they were included and, when they were, how they compared in writing style to the elements in the samples. I feel confident in how this session went. Not only did the faculty member learn from this experience (and that is our ultimate goal as writing center tutors), but I also had an excellent opportunity to learn about discourse practices very different from my own. Not to mention, when she brought in her next grant proposal (which she did three months later), I was ready.

LEARNING TO APPRECIATE

Feeling comfortable with the faculty consultation takes practice. I've worked with dozens of faculty members in my tenure as a writing center tutor, and my heart still races at the beginning of a session with a professor. That said, coming to understand why we tutor faculty and, more importantly, what can come from tutoring faculty, has made the sessions much easier. The experiences I discussed above are only two of many that can occur with faculty, but the lesson is the same. We tutor faculty to show off what we do. We also tutor faculty to get better at what we do. With that in mind, strategizing your next move in an uncomfortable session shouldn't be as daunting. With time, you'll even learn to appreciate how valuable faculty consultations are, both to you and your writing center. ♦

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CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

October 12, 2012: Nebraska Writing Center Consortium, in Omaha, NE

Contact: Katherine Kirkpatrick: KirkpatrickKatherine@clarksoncollege.edu; (402) 552-6117. Conference website: <<http://www.clarksoncollege.edu/academics/professionaldevelopment/continuingeducationevents/>>.

October 25-27, 2012: International Writing Centers Association, in San Diego, CA

Contact: Conference website:

<http://sandbox.socialwriting-centers.org/?page_id=32>.

November 16-17, 2012: Middle East-North Africa Writing Centers Alliance, in Doha, Qatar

Contact: Paula Hayden: awc@cna-qatar.edu.qa; Conference website: <<http://menawca.org/12.html>>.

February 21-23, 2013: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Fort Lauderdale, FL

Contact: Kevin Dvorak: kdvorak@nova.edu; Conference website: <<http://www.iwca-swca.org/Conferences.html>>.

April 4, 2013: Iowa Writing Centers Consortium, in Fayette, IA

Contact: Caroline Ledeboer: ledeboerc@uiu.edu.

April 5-6, 2013: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in California, PA

Contact: Kurt Kearcher: kearcher@calu.edu; (724) 938-4585.