

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E E T T E R

Volume 37, Number 3-4

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

Nov./Dec., 2012

## — FROM THE EDITOR —

The focus of much of writing center scholarship is on what actually happens in writing center tutorials, and the articles in this issue of *WLN* share that emphasis on surveying, analyzing, studying, and reflecting on what tutors do. When Ellen Schendel wondered about tutor perceptions toward working with grammar and mechanics in tutorials and the extent to which they actually do spend time with “rules,” she conducted an international survey and shares her findings with us. Jared Featherstone and Kristen Welch explore another route to tutor interaction: site visits from one newer, smaller center to the other larger writing center. Tutors and directors in both writing centers learned from each other, based on the collaborative experience of those site visits.

Turning to another aspect of tutoring, Nancy Effinger Wilson and Keri Fitzgerald detail for us how they help tutors learn to overcome personal biases towards certain types of students so that they can empathize with *all* the students they work with, not just some. In the process, Wilson and Fitzgerald also uncover another aspect of writing center work that needs more attention in our scholarship: how tutors can help teachers learn to empathize with their students as well. And finally, Emily Bullock takes us inside her tutorial interaction with one student, to show us how important it is, as she says, to work with “the student’s definition of self as a writer,” especially those students who have branded themselves as inept writers. So refill your coffee cup, find a quiet corner (somehow), and settle back for some good reading.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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## WE DON’T PROOFREAD, SO WHAT DO WE DO? A REPORT ON SURVEY RESULTS<sup>1</sup>

◆ Ellen Schendel

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Allendale, MI

In “Whose Idea of a Writing Center Is This, Anyway?” Jeanne Simpson argues that “We need to be open to having our own visions adjusted in surprising ways. The boundaries between what ‘should’ happen in a writing center and what does happen and what might happen are porous to say the least” (4). My own experience confirms what she articulates, particularly when it comes to the way tutors view their work with writers on grammar and mechanics. Consultants in training often express trepidation, either feeling like they didn’t know the rules well enough to spot problems and suggest fixes or feeling conflicted between the advice in their readings about how writing should be much more than “rules” and their desire to address the grammar and mechanics concerns students often want to focus on in sessions.

I wondered to what extent these perceptions of grammar and mechanics work were shared by tutors in other writing centers, so as part of a larger sabbatical study in 2007,<sup>2</sup> I conducted an international survey of writing center tutors about their work with student-writers on these issues. I hoped my findings would help me to strengthen the tutor training opportunities offered in our Center at Grand Valley State University. In the rest of this article, I report on those findings and discuss their implications for how we in the field talk about this work among ourselves and with our tutors. The questions guiding my survey research

*continued on page 2*

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were several: What do tutors identify as the best practices for helping writers with grammar and mechanics? How frequently does that work occur? How do tutors feel about that work? How large a role does a tutor's comfort level with grammar and mechanics play in how frequently (or in what ways) that tutor works with writers on grammar and mechanics issues? To find participants, I posted a message with a link to the survey on the WCenter and European Writing Centers Association (EWCA) listservs. I also posted a link to my survey on the Michigan Writing Centers Association (MWCA) listserv, and invited participants at the East Central Writing Centers Association (ECWCA) conference in March 2007 to participate. The online questionnaire was available to respondents during March and April 2007. Three stories seem to emerge from the data. First, although there are many strategies tutors employ to work with writers on grammar and mechanics, there is also a collection of "best practices" that tutors report using most frequently in their work. Second—and perhaps most significantly—tutors' confidence level in working with writers on grammar and mechanics rules influences how frequently and in what ways they help writers with grammar and mechanics. And third, there are significant differences between the way tutors and directors view working with writers on grammar and mechanics.

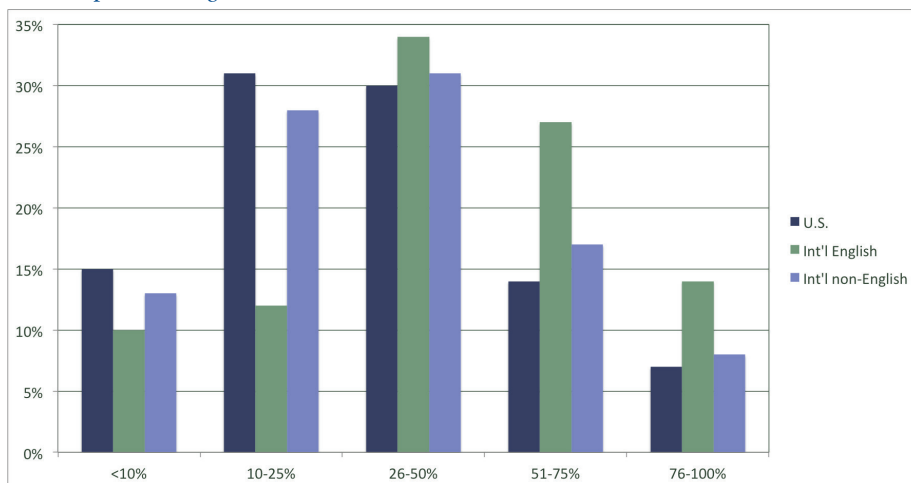
## OVERVIEW OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Two hundred and ninety-six tutors from around the world filled out the questionnaire. It is certainly probable that this number is made up of "pockets" of tutors from specific schools whose directors forwarded the survey link to them, and therefore it would not be accurate to draw generalizable conclusions from the answers these respondents submitted. However, it is clear that even within this small sample, the tutors were working from within many different contexts and had probably experienced the work of tutoring in very different ways, so their answers can still be of generative use. Of the 296 tutors who filled out the online questionnaire, 81% (239 tutors) worked at writing centers within the United States, with the remaining 19% (56 tutors) working at writing centers in other countries around the world. Of those tutors in other countries, 16% (47 tutors) work in writing centers in countries where English is the dominant or official language and the remainder (3%, or 9 tutors) are in countries where English is not the dominant or official language. Tutors responding to this survey held different roles within their writing centers, too, with 54% (159) of all tutor respondents identifying themselves as undergraduates, 19% (55) as graduate students, 18% (54) as professional tutors, and 9% (26) as "other."

## OVERVIEW OF SURVEY RESULTS

So, how much work on grammar and mechanics do tutors seem to engage in? The answer to that question seems to be "a significant amount." All told, just over half of the survey's respondents (168 tutors) reported that they spend at least 26% of their tutoring time working with writers on grammar and mechanics. As Graph 1 shows, however, the international tutors reported working on grammar and mechanics more frequently than tutors from American writing centers.

Graph 1: Time Spent Working With Writers on Grammar and Mechanics



Respondents were asked “What is your writing center’s policy or preference regarding when to address grammar and mechanics issues in tutorials/consultations?” Twenty-three percent (68 tutors) responded “When working with writers on final drafts,” while nearly 46% (136 tutors) responded “When the writer requests grammar/mechanics assistance.” The most respondents--49% (144 tutors)--chose the option “In any consultation, whether or not the writer specifically asks for grammar/mechanics assistance,” and only 1.7% (5 tutors) responded that “My writing center’s policy is not to address grammar/mechanics in tutorials/consultations.”

Parallel responses were given for the question “What is your writing center’s policy or preference regarding with whom to address grammar and mechanics?” The option “Anyone who requests help with grammar/mechanics” was chosen most frequently at 76% (224 tutors), with “Anyone I identify as needing help with grammar/mechanics” chosen next most frequently at 68% (201 tutors). “Writers who are non-native speakers of English” was chosen 37% of the time (109 tutors), and “writers who identify themselves (or are identified) as having learning disabilities” was chosen by 28% of the respondents (82). Survey respondents were asked a series of questions to elicit information about what they do when they are working with writers on grammar and mechanics. They were asked to what resources they turn, as well as how they go about deciding which grammar and mechanics errors to focus on. Finally, they were asked to indicate whether they use each of a set of specific tutoring techniques “often,” “sometimes,” or “never.” What I find most interesting about the responses garnered from this section of the survey is the level of agreement among tutors in reporting which strategies they use. Although respondents report using a wide variety of strategies, there are some clear favorites.

The strategies consultants indicated they “often” or “sometimes” use were:

- I explain why something is an error and how to fix it, but I do not fix the error myself (57% [170] often, 40% [118] sometimes)
- I describe or recommend a proofreading/editing strategy to writers so they can locate errors on their own (71% [210] often, 26% [77] sometimes)
- I read over the writer’s draft and note the kinds of errors that recur throughout; I focus our time addressing those errors first or exclusively (39% [115] often, 51% [151] sometimes)
- I help the writer use a print or electronic resource—such as a handbook, handout, or website—during a tutorial (40% [118] often, 46% [137] sometimes)

The techniques tutors report using most often share a common feature: they are interventions into the text and writing process that refrain from being fully directive. In the end, the writer’s error isn’t fixed by the tutor, nor does the tutor proofread/edit for the writer by locating every error. The tutor offers an interactive extension of the resources provided by the writing center—handbooks, handouts, websites. In fact, the tutors report deferring to the writer or the handbook instead of taking on the role of the writer, even for a moment’s time in the middle of a sentence.

Just as there were clearly identifiable “best practices” that arose from the data, so too were there practices that a rather large group of tutors indicated they would never use:

- I give the writer time during the tutorial to complete a worksheet/workbook/textbook problem to help them learn a grammar or mechanics rule (68% [202] responded “never”)
- I recommend that writers seek the services of a proofreader (60% [179] responded “never”)
- I mark errors on the writer’s paper (32% [95] responded “never”). In this case, 39% (116) indicated they sometimes mark errors.

These “worst practices,” the ones a significant number of respondents indicated they never would employ as tutoring strategies, further highlight the role of the consultant as non-directive interven-

*“ [H]ow much work on grammar and mechanics do tutors seem to engage in? The answer to that question seems to be ‘a significant amount.’ ”*

## TAKE NOTE

### NORTHEAST WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Call for Proposals  
April 13-14, 2013  
Durham, NH  
University of New Hampshire  
*“Writing Enriched, Writing Enhanced: Writing Centers and Writing Across the Curriculum as Partners and Agents for Change”*  
Keynote speakers: Susanmarie Harrington and Sue Dinitz

Electronically submit your proposal by January 4, 2012, to the co-chair of the NEWCA Proposal Reading Committee, Susan DeRosa, at [derosas@easternct.edu](mailto:derosas@easternct.edu). You may submit your proposal as an MS Word attachment or in the body of the e-mail. For more information about submitting proposals, please contact Susan at the address above. For more information about the conference, registration, or scholarship opportunities, including the 2013 NEWACC meeting held at the conference, visit NEWCA ONLINE at [northeastwca.org](http://northeastwca.org).

For other questions related to the conference, e-mail the NEWCA chair, Harry Denny, at [dennyh@stjohns.edu](mailto:dennyh@stjohns.edu), or call him at (718) 390-4158.

tionist. Perhaps marking errors directly on the paper is viewed by tutors as too teacher-like and directive, and something that is best done somewhat sparingly or only in certain situations, while recommending the services of a proofreader isn't viewed as immediately helpful or might be viewed as taking clients away from the writing center or suggesting too directive an approach. Certainly we know from conversations at conferences and on the WCenter listserv that some writing centers do offer graduate students a handout that lists freelance editors they can contact for such services, but the responses to this survey indicate that must not be a particularly common practice, or that it is a “last resort.” Similarly, perhaps taking time out of a consultation to focus on an error with a worksheet or textbook problem is viewed as too teacher-like, a-contextual, or boring to be effective.

### CONFIDENCE MATTERS

Up to this point, the data I've shared with you probably feels natural and obvious. The data suggest that tutors have internalized the purpose of their role as advisors and guides, rather than as teachers, and therefore choose conversational techniques for addressing error rather than correcting errors themselves. However, by cross-referencing responses to certain questions, another story emerges from the data: a greater reported comfort level in working with writers on grammar and mechanics seems to correlate both to a more hands-on approach to helping writers with grammar and mechanics and to the use of a broader range of pedagogical techniques in working with writers.

When it comes to whether tutors “often mark errors” on students' papers, 34% of tutors who report being “very confident” with grammar and mechanics say they do, compared with 51% of those identifying as “somewhat comfortable” and 56% of those identifying as “somewhat uncomfortable” with grammar and mechanics. Moreover, less comfortable tutors are less likely to spend an entire session working on grammar and mechanics with writers (56%) than tutors who are somewhat comfortable (51%) or very comfortable (30%). And although identifying patterns of error and helping writers with those that appear most frequently is a “best practice” among those tutors surveyed, there is a significant difference between those with high confidence levels and those with lower confidence levels in terms of whether they use that practice. While only 8% of tutors who are confident with grammar and mechanics reported that they never use this practice of identifying patterns, that percentage rises among tutors who are only somewhat comfortable (9.5%) or somewhat uncomfortable (18%) with grammar and mechanics themselves.

### EDUCATING TUTORS ABOUT WORKING WITH WRITERS ON GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS

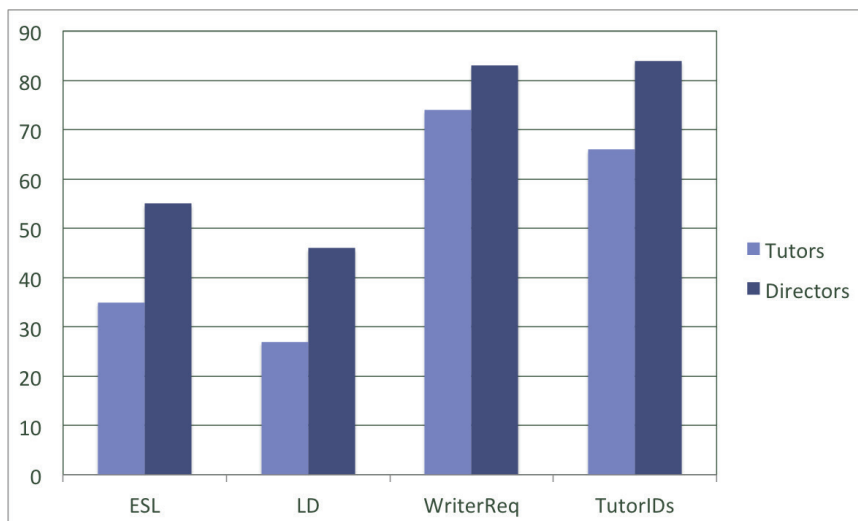
These data are quick and dirty snapshots of how a limited number of tutors self-report both their confidence levels and their practices in working with writers on grammar and mechanics. As such, these data are merely a starting point for raising much larger questions about tutors' tendencies to use various practices in the writing center and the training that influences their choice to use one technique over another. Additionally, their specific local context matters quite a bit in terms of how tutors answer these questions (tutor training programs, expectations or policies of the center on this issue, etc). To help me think through these issues more productively, I shared these survey results with the tutors at Grand Valley's writing center to learn what they perceive to be our local challenges and concerns in working with writers on grammar and mechanics. Here are our musings, as expressed in a Fall 2007 staff meeting:

- First, what makes a tutor feel confident about working with writers on grammar and mechanics? The Grand Valley consultants indicated that their comfort level in working with writers on grammar and mechanics is directly related to their comfort level with the rules of grammar—their perceived ability to find and “fix” errors in their own writing, and therefore in the writing of others.

In turn, this feeling seems to come from a sense that one has the tools to do so effectively. Although not the focus of this article, one of my observations in examining the writing center training guides the directors and tutors I surveyed most frequently mentioned is that they often include relatively little practical advice about how to help writers with grammar and mechanics, and that advice is often folded into larger discussions about writers' processes that focus more on when to address grammar and mechanics than how to help writers with that process. Because helping writers with grammar and mechanics is often viewed as the most directive work that tutors do and tutors are so frequently warned against proofreading and editing for the writer, my sense is that tutors conflate grammar and mechanics with late-in-the-writing-process proofreading, and view both as "inappropriate" or of less importance ("last in the process" somehow taking on "least important part of the process") than other aspects of writing and tutoring.

- Second, does feeling confident about working with writers on grammar and mechanics necessarily yield better tutoring? There are likely benefits and drawbacks to tutors feeling confident in working with writers on grammar and mechanics. On the one hand, tutors who are confident in working with writers on grammar and mechanics might do so in a greater variety of ways, which could imply a useful flexibility when individualizing writing support to a writer's need. On the other hand, tutors who are less confident in working with writers on grammar and mechanics may be more attentive to other aspects of the writing that need work.
- Third, are tutors hearing what directors really think about working with writers on grammar and mechanics? My survey questions asked respondents what their centers' policies were regarding helping writers with grammar and mechanics. Although I could have simply asked when tutors work with different groups of writers on grammar and mechanics, I was interested in tutors' perceptions of what their writing centers policies (or directors' expectations) were. Although my research project included a survey of writing center directors, data which this article doesn't address, it does bear pointing out that there is a difference between directors' and tutors' responses to the question "Who should we help with grammar?" As Graph 2 shows, across the board, a higher percentage of directors than tutors believes we should help ESL writers and those with learning disabilities, as well as students who request help with grammar/mechanics and students whose writing tutors believe need work in that area.

Graph 2: Comparison of Tutor & Director Responses to "Who Should We Help With Grammar"?



I began to wonder whether tutors who felt only "somewhat comfortable" or "somewhat uncomfortable" working with writers on grammar and mechanics felt that way because they perceived they were expected

## 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.), please post it. We also invite you to offer occasional comments about what's going on in your writing center and add links that other writing center folk would be interested in.



@WLNNewsletter



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!

### International Writing Center Blog

#### CONNECTING WRITING CENTERS ACROSS BORDERS

"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

### Writing Center Director Central Michigan University

Tenure-track position in English at the rank of Assistant or Associate Professor beginning Summer 2013. For any questions, Dr. Elizabeth Brockman is the chair of the search committee: brock1em@cmich.edu.

Affiliated with the Department of English Language and Literature, the CMU Writing Center includes multiple sites, employs a staff of 55, and offers a variety of vital services to the university community. Applicants must complete an online application (at <www.jobs.cmich.edu>) that includes a letter of interest, curriculum vitae, evidence of teaching effectiveness, and copies of official transcripts. For a full position description, please see <www.jobs.cmich.edu>. Position #80230.

*Required Qualifications:* This position requires a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition or a related field by August 2013, as well as writing center administrative experience, WAC/WID expertise, and an active research agenda.

*Preferred Qualifications:* Preferred experience/expertise includes basic writing, ESL, online consulting, and/or digital literacies. You must submit an on-line application in order to be considered as an applicant for this position.

Cover letters may be addressed to the Hiring Committee. Please send current letter(s) of reference by mail or e-mail to William Wandless, Chair, Department of English, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859 or english@cmich.edu. Screening of applications began on October 26, 2012 and priority was given applications received by this date.

to avoid doing this work at all, to do it very frequently, or to avoid doing it in certain ways. This certainly resonated with the Grand Valley tutors, who expressed some confusion about their role as tutors in connection to working with grammar and editing. They felt the tutor training materials we used did not include enough practical strategies for how to work productively with writers on grammar and mechanics. They could relate to the survey finding that tutors believe they do a lot of work with writers on grammar and mechanics but that this part of their job was not emphasized enough in tutor training programs. When I shared this survey data at the Michigan Writing Centers Association and East Central Writing Centers Association conferences, tutors and directors alike seemed to connect to this core issue: that grammar and mechanics is not something we spend a lot of time talking about, because we are afraid to overemphasize directive tutoring or to reinforce outsiders' perceptions of the writing center as a grammar fix-it shop.

But if tutors are going to do this work—and do it well—then being underprepared cannot be useful, either to the quality of the tutoring or the tutor's own experiences in the center. Writing center directors can help tutors feel more confident about grammar and mechanics—to gain more mastery of the “rules,” as problematic as it is to characterize grammar, mechanics, and style in that way. Additionally, writing center directors can be more explicit about permitting flexibility in whom to help with grammar and mechanics and in what ways. We might also spend more time giving tutors specific strategies for approaching grammar and mechanics support for writers. For example, looking for patterns of error is a useful way for tutors to go about prioritizing what they work on with student-writers, because it makes more sense to spend time on a grammar or mechanics error that appears throughout the text as opposed to a lone error in the text. So too is looking for errors that impede communication, as those are more likely to trip up readers and interfere with the writer's message. But although those strategies emerged as “best practices” among the tutors surveyed, a rather significant number of tutors reported using these strategies only sometimes, with a smaller group reporting they never used these strategies.

In my own work as a writing center director, I have realized that the only aspect of tutors' work about which I've consistently stressed what not to do is this one of working with writers on grammar and mechanics: don't proofread for the writer, don't mark every error, don't make corrections on the paper, don't use a red pen, don't be a teacher. I have to remind myself to give strategies for what to do, and lately, I've made a concerted effort to drop the negative talk altogether and simply present working on grammar and mechanics as a regular part of the job, connected to editing and proofreading, which are normal parts of writers' processes. Part of normalizing this work in the writing center also means helping the consultants to feel confident about grammar and mechanics, and to embrace that there are many ways to engage with writers—directive and nondirective—in helping them to work through the grammar and mechanics errors they want and need to work on. ♦

#### Endnotes

1 Thank you to Kim Ballard, who offered useful feedback to this manuscript, and to the 2008-2009 tutors in the Fred Meijer Center for Writing & Michigan Authors, who helped me to think more deeply about the survey's results.

2 The larger study entailed a literature review of the history of grammar instruction in the United States, a survey of writing center directors about how they educate tutors to work on grammar and mechanics issues, and interviews with staff and observations of their tutorials at Kingston University in the UK and Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey.

#### Work Cited

Simpson, Jeanne. “Whose Idea of a Writing Center Is This, Anyway?” *Writing Lab Newsletter* 35.1 (2010): 1-4. Print.

## ONE-TO-ONE BECOMES MANY-TO-MANY: A CONSULTATION BETWEEN TWO CENTERS

◆ *Jared Featherstone, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA*  
*Kristen Welch, Longwood University Farmville, VA*

We first heard the suggestion of making site visits to nearby writing centers during the 2010 IWCA Summer Institute. It sounded like an interesting way to develop our own centers and share expertise. However, this idea quickly got lost in the flood of insights, theories, and discussions that emerged during the institute. After returning home to Virginia and reflecting on the Summer Institute, Kristen Welch thought a site visit to James Madison University (JMU) might be a great way to learn how to develop her center at nearby Longwood University. Because JMU's center had three sites, a staff of 20, a 35-year history, and over 3000 clients per year, it seemed like an ideal place for her tutors to see the possibilities for their part-time center, which had a staff of nine and 200-300 clients per year. As we began to plan for Longwood's visit to JMU, we saw that this type of exchange was very much in line with the tutoring practices we cultivate and study. We became intrigued by the idea that our writing center values and practices could be applied outside of the standard one-to-one model. In "Using Tutorial Principles to Train Tutors: Practicing Our Praxis," Muriel Harris advocates for this outside application of tutorial principles to tutor training, so we thought it would be interesting to see where else we could put our praxis to use. We were also just plain curious as to what would happen when a director and peer tutors from one center visited another in the name of professional development and community. Our meeting followed a pattern that was similar to a tutoring session. We set goals, entered into a productive dialogue, and established a plan for revision. For writing center administrators considering a site visit, we offer here a walk-through of how we planned and implemented ours. Careful planning can help to ensure productive and enriching experiences for both centers.

### SETTING GOALS FOR THE SESSION: WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO WORK ON?

When we discussed the proposed site visit, the conversation unfolded much like one in a typical writing center session. JMU's Director, Jared Featherstone, began by asking the classic question about what Kristen wanted to get out of this field trip. As a model for how other directors might set goals for a field trip, here are some questions for the "diagnostic phase":

1. What are your goals for your Writing Center? How do you see my Writing Center as a model for where you would like to be in the future?
2. What are areas of weakness that are of particular concern to you?
3. What kinds of resources does your center still need (for clients, the tutors, you as director)?
4. What area would you most like to focus on during your visit? What do you hope to get out of this visit?

In response to these questions, Kristen said that her center was small but hoping to expand. She wanted her tutors to see the types of programs we have at JMU's Writing Center and learn about the possibilities. We agreed that part of the visit could be a discussion that would involve some modeling of programs and processes. She also said that her tutors felt underprepared to work with English Language Learners. Considering these needs, we decided that the visitors from Longwood would attend the 300-level Tutoring Writing class that is the core of JMU's training and writing center culture (Schick et al.). They would also attend the weekly development meeting that brings current tutors together to discuss tutoring issues and invited JMU's coordinator of English Language Learner Services to attend that meeting. The idea was that, as in any productive tutoring session, tutors from both universities would investigate and discuss these issues together.

Thinking about this experience from the host/tutor side of this collaboration, we can make a few suggestions for maximizing the visit:

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Center for Excellence in Writing State University of New York— Buffalo

The University at Buffalo seeks a senior scholar, Associate or Full Professor of Composition and Rhetoric, to lead our research-based Center for Excellence in Writing. The successful candidate will have a strong record of publication, teaching, administration, and scholarly vision. Scholarship in writing pedagogy might include writing in the disciplines or professions, writing center theory and practice, writing assessment, service learning, or global literacies/Englishes.

Teaching load, salary, benefits, and privileges competitive with other Research-1 universities. Ph.D. or equivalent. Priority deadline: November 15, 2012. Send applications (vita and three letters of recommendation) to <www.ubjobs.buffalo.edu>. For information, contact Interim Director, Center for Excellence in Writing, Arabella Lyon (alyon@buffalo.edu). The University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, is an affirmative action/equal opportunity employer. Women and minorities are encouraged to apply.

# TAKE NOTE

## SOUTH CENTRAL WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Feb. 21-23, 2013  
Corpus Christi, TX  
"Building Bridges"  
Keynote speaker: Clint Gardner

The conference is hosted by the Center for Academic Student Achievement's Writing Center at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and the Stone Writing Center at Del Mar College. Conference Chairs are Noelle Ballmer (TAMUCC) & Linda Eubank (Del Mar College). Questions can be sent to Noelle Ballmer at [noelle.ballmer@tamucc.edu](mailto:noelle.ballmer@tamucc.edu); phone: 361.825.2254. For information about registration, the program, the conference hotel, etc., see the Conference website: [www.scwca2013.com/#!home/mainPage](http://www.scwca2013.com/#!home/mainPage).

1. Determine a day and/or time of the week in which the host tutors will have time and space to interact with the visiting tutors. Both directors can learn a lot from listening to the tutors' discussions. If you have a site visit during a time that your center is overrun with tutees, you won't have much time for your guests.
2. Choose a day that includes some type of staff development activity. We chose a day in which JMU's tutoring writing course met and the current peer tutors had their weekly staff meeting. That way, all tutors are in a reflective mode to think about tutoring practice and tutors from both centers can learn together.
3. Consider planning a less structured time for the tutors to interact, too. Between the course and our meeting, we had a lunch with peer tutors and staff from both centers. The tutors appreciated being able to talk candidly outside of a class or meeting.

### ENTERING INTO A DIALOGUE: WHAT RESOURCES CAN WE SHARE?

Even though Longwood was coming to JMU for guidance, we thought it was important for everyone involved to see this as a collaborative professional development effort. The visiting tutees participated in discussions about tutoring practice and theory during class, meeting, and lunch. Tutors from both centers worked together to brainstorm strategies for incorporating online resources into face-to-face sessions, working with English Language Learners, and preparing new tutors for writing center work. The Tutoring Writing class proved to be a rich environment for learning. That day in class, we had about eighteen aspiring JMU tutors, a panel of three experienced JMU tutors, two writing center faculty members, Longwood's director, JMU's director, and five Longwood tutors in the same room. Since Kristen, the LU director, had only conducted monthly or bi-monthly training sessions, she had wondered how far behind her tutors might be. Longwood does not have a tutor training course, and their center runs on a much smaller scale than JMU's. However, the visiting tutors made substantive contributions to the class discussion and took advantage of the panel of experienced tutors arranged for that day's class. Just as in a tutoring session, the dialogue between the directors and tutors resulted in an epiphany. A learning moment occurred when class instructor Karen McDonnell gave a demonstration of a linked resource about writing a literature review during class. Longwood tutors quickly identified JMU's online resource directory as something they needed to be able to access and use; this resource has now been linked to LU's Writing Center homepage. JMU tutors spoke about using resources like the literature review link during a session to help both the tutor and the student navigate difficult aspects of writing.

We were impressed with the collective knowledge and insight of our tutors and the way they candidly shared experiences. The center-to-center tutoring session was collaborative in the way we hope one-to-one writing center sessions to be. Later, Longwood Senior Laura Beth Sticker, one of the visiting tutors, said, "[T]his JMU field trip was the first big step to improving the quality and instruction of writing tutoring at Longwood University." The biggest surprise of the afternoon for Kristen was realizing that her tutors did not know how to effectively and efficiently use the online and print resources they already had. During the afternoon development meeting, one Longwood tutor said they didn't have any resources on helping students with grammar, despite the recent workshop on that very topic. The idea that Longwood's training sessions needed to regularly highlight the practice of identifying and locating resources became very clear.

Another improvement opportunity for Longwood's Writing Center was the lack of training for the tutors who worked with ELL students. That week, JMU's staff meeting was focused on working with English Language Learners and included the ELL Director as a special guest. The Longwood visitors took notes on the advice the JMU tutors gave, and the director took notes on the concerns Longwood tutors voiced. The ELL Director brought up several complex issues related to working with ELL students, too much to be covered in a single training session or even two. Both directors see ELL support as a growing area of study for our writing centers. Ultimately, the meeting proved to be very helpful for Kristen because it gave her a good starting place for developing the resources that were needed at Longwood. One of the unforeseen benefits



of arranging this tutoring session between our centers was that tutors had to articulate aspects of practices and policies that often go unsaid. In order to explain the ways in which they work with English Language Learners, tutors needed to identify and reevaluate techniques like modeling, use of grammar terminology, and inquiry. JMU's staff had to explain why they think it is a good investment of time to create online resources and a directory of links<sup>1</sup> and train tutors to use them. The tutors from Longwood were immediately pointing out ways to apply what they were learning during these discussions and explaining how some of these tutoring strategies overlapped with their current practices.

## SETTING GOALS FOR REVISION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As we train our tutors to do at the end of a writing center session, we advocate setting aside time after a site visit to consider how to incorporate what was learned. In a scenario like ours, in which one center is more developed than the other, the visiting center might identify and catalog what they learned during the visit, then draft a revision plan based on these. Longwood's post-visit reflection produced the following discoveries and revision plans:

1. **Gaps in tutor education.** The changes for the next year included holding weekly training sessions and setting clear reappointment criteria for tutors planning to return.
2. **Lack of engagement with tutors.** While Kristen knew three of the five who were students in the Rhetoric and Professional Writing program, she did not really know the two younger tutors at her center. She realized this was a problem because her younger tutors often didn't voice the need for help. In addition to the weekly training sessions, Kristen plans to produce a newsletter like JMU's tutor-authored UWC Monthly.<sup>2</sup> She also planned to increase the number of formal observations she conducts and to meet with the tutors for a follow-up discussion. We both feel that mentoring is crucial to establishing and maintaining a good relationship with peer tutors.
3. **Ongoing resource training.** The training sessions for next year will of course cover subjects like setting a plan for the session, using comments to coach writers, and so on, but they will also highlight and ask tutors to discuss one print or online resource each time they meet. The tutors need to become proficient using the resources.
4. **More advertisement.** Jared has a syllabus statement about the Writing Center that faculty can download from the UWC website. Although Kristen wasn't able to do that, she was able to run an ad for Longwood's center in the weekly e-mail that contains news and events for students.
5. **Quality of advertisement.** A JMU art professor created Jared's poster for late night tutoring, and a graphic design student created the logo. Jared found that the quality of these PR materials made an impression at his institution. At Longwood, Kristen will be seeking the help of students in our new "Design Lab" to create posters and a logo to help establish their center's ethos and presence.

After making plans, Kristen noted that the next step is to find realistic ways to put these plans into action. She will be asking faculty to allow time for workshops in their classes. She'll e-mail all faculty teaching writing-intensive courses separately, personally asking how the Writing Center can serve their needs. Longwood will intensify tutor training, create or update at least one print or online resource each semester, and read one article or chapter about composition theory each month, using the *Bedford Bibliography* to list appropriate articles. In addition, Longwood will request approval for their Writing Center to be added to the library sign in the center of campus, which will give the center greater visibility. Finally, Kristen will work with the Office of Assessment and Institutional Research on a Writing Center assessment plan, which will highlight the important student support the Center provides and possibly be a means of justifying more funds for future development.

## WRAPPING THINGS UP: FILING THE SESSION REPORT

Thinking about the way we set up this visit and the way our tutors interacted, we saw that the values and best practices we advocate for one-to-one sessions actually translate very well to a many-to-many session. For example, at the end of every tutoring session at JMU, tutors file a session report.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Writing Center Director Pitzer College (Claremont Colleges)

Pitzer College, a member of the Claremont Colleges, invites applications for a tenure-track Assistant Professor to serve as Writing Center Director beginning Fall 2013. The successful candidate will develop and maintain the Writing Center, have responsibility for supervising a part-time Administrative Coordinator, and a staff of both graduate and undergraduate student assistants. The person will serve as a resource for faculty who teach writing in the interdisciplinary First-Year Seminar program, conduct workshops, and teach three writing courses per academic year.

To apply please follow the instructions at <[www.pitzer.edu/facultyapply](http://www.pitzer.edu/facultyapply)>. A complete application will include a letter of application, curriculum vitae, selected evidence of excellence in teaching and research, statement of teaching philosophy, a description of your research, and three letters of recommendation. Within their applications, candidates should address how their cultural, experiential, and/or academic background contributes to the understanding of diversity at the College. The deadline for applying is November 1, 2012 or until the position is filled.

Due to the high number of applications we receive, we ask that you please e-mail your questions to [writing\\_search@pitzer.edu](mailto:writing_search@pitzer.edu).

This forces a self-evaluation on the part of the tutor and offers a resource for other tutors. By having to explain what they do every day and why, the tutors gained some perspective and became more conscious of their own tutoring practice, the same way writing tutors might become more conscious about their choices as a writer after spending time tutoring. With this visit, the tutors also enjoyed being able to apply their skills of collaboration and inquiry in a different setting. They worked together on solving difficulties that all tutors face. Tutors shared the techniques and resources that they found useful. During and after the Longwood visit, JMU tutors felt proud to work for a center that others consider to be a model center.

This session report or reflection aspect is one that JMU's Director hopes to improve the next time they host another center. Although he learned from speaking informally with individual tutors after the visit, JMU's director realized that it would have been better to schedule a follow-up meeting for the JMU staff to reflect upon what they learned from the visit. The tutors probably would have had ideas for how they could be even more effective hosts next time. It's also quite likely that they learned something about being professional and that this new mentoring role gave them different ideas about their professional identity and tutoring practice. So, we advise host centers to consider the learning opportunities for their tutors, before and after the visit.

Longwood's Graduate Assistant, Jennifer Jackson, summed up the value of the trip for her center:

"In addition to being a therapeutic exercise for tutors from both schools, the visit provided significant insight on two successful writing centers at two very different universities. While the school centers are significantly different in size, Longwood tutors still felt that many of the resources JMU tutors presented could be used in their smaller center. Overall, Longwood tutors felt the meeting was successful as the JMU tutors provided many ideas as to how each tutor can develop personally, and how that can transfer into developing a better center at Longwood."

Writing centers often maintain a database of session reports so that they can study the progress of students and tutors over time. This article is our way filing a "session report" after our site visit, so that other centers might benefit from using the writing center consultation model as a blueprint for collaborative development between two institutions. ♦

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This directory, containing links to both outside sites and in-house resources, can be found on JMU's University Writing Center website: <[www.jmu.edu/uwc/link\\_library.html](http://www.jmu.edu/uwc/link_library.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> Each month, JMU's peer tutors, grad assistants, and faculty collaborate to produce a magazine-style publication called *UWC Monthly*: <[www.jmu.edu/uwc/newsletter.html](http://www.jmu.edu/uwc/newsletter.html)>.

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## EMPATHIC TUTORING IN THE THIRD SPACE

◆ Nancy Effinger Wilson and Keri Fitzgerald  
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*“Stay impure: welcome mixed descent and cross purposes” (Terrance Riley 150)*

Sabina comes to the writing center because she is struggling with an assignment requiring her to research her last name using the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Sabina explains that her last name is her father’s first name, and she cannot find his name in the *OED*. Sabina also mentions that her professor calls her “Sabrina,” but she is afraid to correct him. Joseph visits the writing center because he is struggling with an assignment that requires him to select magazine advertisements that feature people of the opposite sex whom he finds sexually attractive. Joseph remarks that he does not find anyone of the opposite sex to be sexually attractive.

Many writing center administrators, ourselves included, might be reluctant to confront faculty members, our “customers,” about the blind spots their writing assignments expose. And we caution our tutors, as does *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, for example, to “never comment negatively to students about a teacher’s teaching methods, assignments, personality, or grading policies. . . . Keep in mind that students are relating their impressions or interpretations, and these may be incomplete or even inaccurate. More often than not, there are valid explanations for what may appear to be a problem” (1). Should the tutor relate a concern to a writing center administrator, such conversations are usually kept “in house,” sending a message that the writing center must protect/fear the professor, even if at the expense of the tutee. Unfortunately, by publicly supporting a “the professor is always right” policy, we are supporting a faculty—>writing center—>student hierarchy that resembles Paulo Freire’s “banking education” whereby knowledge is “bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (72). Not only may tutors feel uncomfortable expressing concerns to their tutees for fear of angering professors, they may also not even feel concern if they believe their job is solely to side with the professor. For example, when we mentioned Sabina’s and Joseph’s dilemmas in a training session, a tutor recommended that Joseph pretend to be heterosexual, and another noted that surely Sabina could just research an American name. In other words, even though the professors’ assignments were flawed, the student had to adjust; in contrast, the professors would not even know there was a problem.

Fortunately, though, rather than telling Sabina and Joseph the professor is always “right,” their actual tutors opted to move beyond tutoring to advocacy. We still recall Sabina’s tutor’s exact words: “Can you imagine? Can you imagine how Sabina must feel?” We contacted the professors to ask if the assignments could be modified: “Could a student use the *OED* to research another person’s name or use another source to research his/her own?” and “Could a student analyze images of people from the same gender?” Both professors were shocked by their oversights and apologized for them. Sabina and Joseph acted as our and the professors’ teachers that day, and in the process provided a model of what a writing center could/should look like—a metacognitive, flexible third space—a part of the university but also apart from it. In particular, by replacing the top-down, unidirectional communication chain with an interactive, empathic conversation that included faculty members, we began to chisel at heteronormative and ethnocentric biases. Although we must continue to acknowledge the professor as the audience of most of our tutees’ papers, we believe writing centers must also empathize with the audience of essay prompts—our tutees—because they have much to teach us and the faculty.

### STEP ONE: RECOGNITION

New tutors often arrive at training with the same blind spots as the faculty they support. For example, William Broussard in “Collaborative Work, Competitive Students, Counter-Narrative,” chronicles faculty and tutor biases against student athletes, lamenting that “when students are socially constructed as ‘uninterested’ and ‘unmotivated’ on one end and alienated from their labor on the other before they ever enter their classrooms, then what hope do they have of succeeding within its walls unless the stereotypes are destroyed?” (3). In order to help tutors develop the emotional intelligence known as empathy and achieve critical consciousness, they must first recognize their own bias. To that end, in a training session we call “I’m Not Waving. I’m Drowning,” we ask the tutors to list various individuals with whom they could never empathize.

They typically note individuals associated with horrific deeds—“rapists,” “pedophiles,” murderers,” “Hitler.” We then ask the tutors to list various types of tutees with whom they could never empathize. The tutors begin tentatively with individuals they perceive as clearly in the wrong: “cheaters” and “people who try to get the tutor to do their work.” However, the list quickly grows as individuals happily shout out “underachievers,” “whiners,” “people who arrive late to an appointment.” Each of the three times we have led this session, the tutors have had no qualms about marking themselves as “good students” and declaring their peers as “bad students,” people unworthy of compassion, even though some of these “wrongs,” such as being late, the tutors themselves had committed.

The first time we witnessed this melee of attacks, we were taken aback; we presumed that at least a few tutors would say that, short of a murderer or rapist, they could empathize with every tutee. However, as one tutor later noted, becoming a tutor is “a huge boost to the ego,” and obviously the power can be so exhilarating, it warrants protecting. Fortunately, we had a strategy in place to help these tutors see their own biases (e.g. egocentrism and exceptionalism). We first called the tutors’ attention to the absurdity of placing a student who tries to coerce a tutor in the same category as a rapist, an indicator that the tutors were taking their tutees’ disinterest, lack of desire to achieve academic competence, or resistance personally and defensively. We also asked the tutors to generate reasons someone might “underachieve”: a lack of self-confidence, a non-communicative professor, life’s stressors. And we asked the tutors to consider innocent “cheating,” as when students plagiarize unwittingly. Our goal was to force tutors into the third space, or what Gloria Anzaldúa calls *nepantla*, a “site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures” (548-49). We knew these tutors needed these different perspectives in order to recognize how judgmentally they were behaving and in order to swap out insensitivity and arrogance for empathy.

## STEP TWO: ACTION

Privately, tutors and their tutees contextualize and complicate professors’ writing assignments, assessments, and perspectives all the time, but to critique faculty publicly is a daunting proposition. Although feelings of empathy for a tutee should lead to action—expressions of understanding, a discussion about the issue, advocacy—as noted, tutors function near the bottom of a steep hierarchical model. In order to help tutors to feel comfortable with respectfully disagreeing with professors, we reject “the professor is always right” mentality in favor of the professor is “always the audience.” Although this shift does retain the top-down hierarchical model since the professor is still the ultimate judge, by challenging professor infallibility we are emphasizing that the tutee and the tutor have rhetorical choices to make—have agency—as opposed to being powerless and silenced. For example, a few semesters ago Roberto visited the writing center after receiving an “F” on a First-Year English essay. When the tutor turned to the last page to read the professor’s terminal comments, she found only this statement: “You do not belong in college. Go to the Writing Center.” Roberto was also verbally told that his topic was “unscholarly” (a poignant depiction of the cycles of his grandmother’s small family garden and its impact on her community); he also sometimes placed adjectives after nouns, and he incorrectly conjugated irregular verbs. The tutor questioned this professor’s statement, emphasizing the unfairness of telling Roberto that he, not his writing, did not belong in college. However, the tutor also stressed that the goal in writing should be to find the best means by which to convey one’s ideas to a particular audience (i.e. rhetorical effectiveness). Consequently, given this particular audience, Roberto needed to write one way; on the other hand, for another audience, Roberto’s essay might be even more appropriate than an essay written in “Standard” Edited American English. The tutor also explained that many published activists and scholars such as Carol Hanisch and Cherríe Moraga would see the value of an essay on his grandmother’s garden because “the personal is political.”<sup>1</sup>

It is essential to note that the actions of Roberto’s tutor do not stand at odds with the objectives of teaching academic writing. In fact, writing centers that enforce a “professor is always right” policy unfortunately suggest that there is only one “right” way to write, an assumption that dissolves the intentions of academic argumentation. Ultimately, Roberto re-wrote this paper, changing his topic and using Edited American English, but he did so conscious of his other options and no longer shamed by his original choices and by his home discourse. And through this experience, the tutor and we as her supervisors also began to see the systemic problems of the university and reflect on how we had been complicit in their maintenance.

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1. “The Personal is Political” is the title of Carol Hanisch’s essay published in the 1970 *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, edited by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt. It has become a popular slogan for feminists to counter prejudice against politicizing the personal.

## STEP THREE: REFLECTION

Jay D. Sloan, in his 1999 *Writing Lab Newsletter* Tutor's Column entitled "Closet Consulting," exemplifies the empathic intellectual—a tutor who consciously seeks out a means by which he can relate to a tutee, to find common ground between them. Sloan, a gay man, tells of his experience tutoring an individual who was arguing that homosexuality is a sin. Although it would be understandable if an LGBTQ individual were to dismiss outright a homophobic individual, Sloan taps into memories of his own early years at the university and "identifies" with his tutee. Sloan reflects on the experience: "Never had I felt myself, my own identity, so directly threatened—pushed back towards the old ultimatum, that suffocating closet door" (9). Note the physicality of what Sloan experiences: "threatened," "pushed back," "suffocating." We would have encouraged Sloan to share his perspective on the issue of homosexuality as a sin with this tutee. Perhaps the tutee would have likewise discovered empathy, clearly a benefit of engaging in the third space.

Encouragingly, most tutors express appreciation not only for the training that helps them become more empathic and tolerant, but also the chance to reflect on these internal changes, as Sloan is able to do in his essay, and we are able to do in this one. As part of their training, tutors in our writing center regularly journal, blog, and/or tweet their reflections on various pieces of writing center scholarship. Often, these responses turn inward. In a response to Harry Denny's "Queering the Writing Center," for instance, one tutor opted to journal about how tutoring had "queered" her worldview: "When I began tutoring, I would judge Asian people, thinking they were inherently brighter, and when they failed to understand what I told them, I was more disappointed in them than in, say, the black people I tutored. I feel awful admitting this, but I was always surprised to meet a black student with good grammar, and as surprised when the black students tried harder than others to learn what I was saying."

This tutor's biases against African Americans and African American English resemble those Sharroky Hollie cites in "Acknowledging the Language of African American Students": "Still, many African American students will walk into classrooms and be discreetly taught in most cases, and explicitly told in others, that the language of their forefathers, their families, and their communities is bad language, street language, the speech of the ignorant and/or uneducated. They will be 'corrected' and told their 'she be' should be 'she is'" (54). But, as the tutor notes, these were her prejudices; tutoring had led to an internal paradigm shift. As she explains, "tutoring made me examine and alter those prejudices, and my ability to help people increased." Because the tutor's stereotypes were challenged via face-to-face dialogue with students from diverse backgrounds, she began to question her prejudice. She began to empathize.

## CONCLUSION

Jeremy Rifkin, author of *The Empathic Civilization*, argues that empathic skills "emphasize a non-judgmental orientation and tolerance of other perspectives" and force people "to live within the context of ambiguous realities where there are no simple formulas or answers, but only a constant search for shared meanings and common understandings" (15-6). Rifkin could be describing a writing center tutorial, or more specifically an empathic writing center tutorial. Sabina's tutor realized what Sabina already knew: despite its rhetoric of encouraging diversity, many in academia in America operate from a monocultural paradigm that assumes/encourages assimilation ("Sabina" is called "Sabrina"). Joseph's tutor acquired perspective into the life of a gay man in a heteronormative world—the pain of feeling invisible but the worry of discrimination should you speak up. And in these examples lies one of the less obvious benefits of one-to-one tutoring: in the midst of conflicting messages and on the border, not the center, of the status quo, one is able to experience and therefore challenge mechanisms in place to support existing privileges at the expense of others.

Tutors need to take the initiative to function as advocates on the part of the students, but writing centers also need to build bridges that will make such advocacy possible without negative repercussions for the writing center tutee and tutor. By challenging the "banking concept" of education and inviting faculty into the conversation, we hope to create a network of empathic intellectuals. ♦

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# TUTOR'S COLUMN

## ADDRESSING APPREHENSION: APPROACHING THE LOW SELF-EFFICACY WRITER

◆ *Emily Bullock*  
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Our Western Kentucky University (WKU) Writing Center is stocked with the stereotypical supplies meant to make student writers feel at home: post-it notes, a rainbow of highlighters, almost-sharpened pencils, multiple colored pens (except red, of course), and a vast array of *APA*, *MLA*, and *Chicago Manual* handbooks placed strategically around the room. Centered on an individual table, however, is a box of tissues. These were in place prior to flu season—and even now, in the wake of a Kentucky winter and multiple bouts of sinusitis, they remain mostly untouched—but their original purpose was meant for more than soothing runny noses.

There is a WKU legend of “the emotional outburst” from students who arrive seeking assistance and later collapse into tears of inadequacy and defeat. Typically these individuals—both male and female—enter the Writing Center with pre-existing tensions. Though it is possible their tearful moments of release are caused by their papers, many are simply experiencing a culmination of stress, anxiety, and self-doubt that often afflicts the university student.

My first and only experience with an emotional undergraduate didn't culminate in much of a literal outburst. In fact, he didn't weep, whine, or collapse into hysterics: instead, he was completely subdued. He sat opposite me, placed his paper on the table, and rolled about six inches away in one of our wheeled chairs. “Here's this,” he said as he put his hand on the text and slid it closer. “I don't even know what to say about it. It's bad. I'm completely defeated.” Had he not literally said the word ‘defeated,’ I could have guessed that was his emotional locus: he put his head in his hands and touched his elbows to his knees, curling into himself just an arm's length away. The paper—only seven pages—remained closer to me, as if he was passing off the plague.

I quickly found out this was his second paper written for the same class. The first one was deemed passable, but just barely, and this one had already been marked up with his teacher's comments. He showed me, flipping to the second page where a note had been added in the margin: “If I actually graded this, you'd get a D.” These comments—and the ghost of those past—would come up repeatedly in our session. Each time I suggested something new, to change his wording or vary his sentence structure, he'd respond with, “She won't like that. I tried that before.”

Much research has looked at apprehensive writers. In those cases, low self-esteem is based specifically toward writing and the process that produces it; in other words, these individuals aren't wholly anxious people, and their hesitation shouldn't be confused with laziness. Carol Etheridge and Patricia Wachholz's article, “Speaking for Themselves: Writing Self-Efficacy Beliefs of High- and Low-Apprehensive Writers,” notes the most common reasons that “high-apprehensive” students balk at the idea of writing and writing-based classes: often, they reference failures in prior English classes, limited writing opportunities in the past, and the belief that “good writing is an innate quality rather than a process requiring a great deal of effort” (15). Writing, as a developmental quality, moves on a continuum, so when there is a “glitch” in the process—or when students receive heavy criticism at a crucial point of their maturation, without any positive reinforcement or encouragement for continued growth—feelings of anxiety surface.

It is important to note that this student took an exceedingly assertive approach to the session. As I began to read quietly to myself, he took the pen from my hand and started making changes before I even addressed the paper. It was clear he had an investment in the piece, so when I noticed that the teacher in question was an upper-level English professor, I asked if he was an English major. He answered yes, he had recently declared English as his focus. His eyes drilled into the professor's comments—specifically the one where she claimed his wording was off and his meaning was unclear—when he continued, “Although I don't know why, since I clearly suck at writing. Maybe that's a mistake, too.” How quickly I was reminded of his defeat, how accurately he had self-identified that emotion. Yet, considering this recent declaration of study, his feelings made sense. He had committed to English, to an assumed career path, but even in doing so he still had hesitations toward writing. His

professor's recent comments added to this distress, and more than once, when I suggested a reworking of a paragraph structure, he consented with, "You're the expert." Essentially, his low sense of self-efficacy for writing was tormented by previous grade-based judgments and isolated by my "expertise," just as is mentioned in Etheridge and Wachholz's study.

As writing center tutors, we have limited access to our patrons: sometimes a single visit, capped at the half-hour timespan, may be the only time we encounter a certain individual. And I'm not suggesting we are career counselors, life coaches, babysitters, or hand-holders, but we can give some degree of reassurance in our sessions. According to Ellen Lavelle and Nancy Zuercher's article, "University Students' Beliefs about Writing and Writing Approaches," we cannot overestimate the importance of a student's "positive identity in writing in conjunction with acquiring increased skills" (385). This point is echoed by Etheridge and Wachholz, who encourage "[identifying]. . . improvements in writing . . . [and helping] students see how their competencies, successes, or improvements are related to their own specific efforts" (18). The academic proficiency we promote should not be centered on the student answering correctly, filling in the blank with the "right" response; in doing this, we would be encouraging an undergraduate only to feel achievement when he or she experiences immediate success, and this is not always attainable. Instead, encouragement should follow students' attempts, their learning processes, their movement toward triumph. Carol S. Dweck's article "Even Geniuses Work Hard" states, "Meaningful work not only promotes learning in the immediate situation, but also promotes a love of learning and resilience in the face of obstacles" (20). As non-grading members of faculty, both undergraduate and graduate tutors are simultaneously approachable and skilled in our craft; thus, we exist in prime position to render genuine, positive feedback for even the smallest of achievements.

I'll admit I was skeptical when I first heard of the reason behind the Writing Center's tissue stock; in my mind an emotional session ended in hysterics, with the student's tears smearing their inked words just before he or she dramatically exited, paper in hand. Certainly this is a possibility, and Gayla Mills' "Preparing for Emotional Sessions" outlines how best to approach these students. In reality, my student never had any need for the Kleenex, and he didn't throw up his hands or threaten to abandon the cause: instead, he returned for a second appointment with a revamped paper, and he rallied. Looking back, perhaps I underestimated his resiliency. Maybe I was able to assuage his fear just enough on the criticisms we face as writers, or maybe I offered some comfort: his so-called "expert" admitting to my own share of defeated moments in the writing arena. Or, as is often the case, perhaps he was just eager to hear praise and acknowledgment of his progress.

Inside the writing center, we are constantly reminded that our jobs are meant for more than addressing solitary works—that seven-page paper already marked with an unofficial D, for instance—so it is important to remember that the writing process we're trying to cultivate and improve begins with that student's definition of self as a writer. Addressing this is a touchy subject at best, considering most undergraduates aren't going to introduce themselves and then self-diagnose as an apprehensive, nervous, or low self-efficacy writers. And, in many cases, their identification as such wouldn't be severe enough to inhibit a session. Yet emotional sessions do exist, and as tutors we may be presented with a piece of writing that embodies that student's personal fears and self-doubt. Our obligation then is to approach each individual piece with skill, scrutiny, and care: the students who utilize the writing center are already acknowledging a certain desire for improvement, and that in itself is commendable. ♦

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## CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

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

**Contact:** Paula Hayden: [awc@cna-qatar.edu.qa](mailto:awc@cna-qatar.edu.qa); Conference website: <http://menaw-ca.org/12.html>.

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

**Contact:** Kevin Dvorak: [kdvorak@nova.edu](mailto:kdvorak@nova.edu); Conference website: <http://www.iwca-swca.org/Conferences.html>.

**February 21-23, 2013:** South Central Writing Centers Association, in Corpus Christi, TX

**Contact:** Noelle Ballmer: Noelle.Ballmer@tamucc.edu; (361-825-2254); Conference website: <http://www.scwca2013.com/#!/home/main-Page>.

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

**Contact:** Caroline Ledebuer at [ledeboerc@uiu.edu](mailto:ledeboerc@uiu.edu).

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

**Contact:** Kurt Kearcher at [kearcher@calu.edu](mailto:kearcher@calu.edu); (724-938-4585).

**April 13-14, 2013:** Northeastern Writing Centers Association, in Durham, NH

**Contact:** Harry Denny at [dennyh@stjohns.edu](mailto:dennyh@stjohns.edu); (718-390-4158); Conference website: <http://northeastwca.org>.