



WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Member of the NCTE Affiliate
Information Exchange Agreement

Vol. VIII, No. 1 (September, 1983)

Though it's been a long, hot, muggy summer for too many of us, I hope you also managed to relax, read, rest, and recuperate. Welcome back to everyone!

As you'll see from the announcements and reports that fill the pages of this month's newsletter, and in up-coming issues, writing lab people have launched into the next stage of growth, the formation of regional associations and the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA), an assembly of the NCTE. As the publication of the NWCA and regional groups, the newsletter now participates in the NCTE Information Exchange and is asked to include the phrase that you see in the upper left-hand corner of this page.

You'll also notice that in this issue of the newsletter you are invited to ponder the question of who among us are "muckety-mucks" and/or Super Tutors. I await your response!

I also await those yearly donations of \$5. While many people managed to remember to send in donations during the summer, which are greatly appreciated (especially the beneficent souls who voluntarily double and triple their contributions--may their tribe increase), I offer a gentle reminder to everyone else. The costs of duplicating and mailing the newsletter need to be shared by all. Since we do not send out bills or invoices, we rely instead on your conscience. So, along with your articles, announcements, reviews, inquiries, and names of new members, please send your \$5/year checks (made payable to Purdue University, but sent to me) to:



Muriel Harris
WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER
Dept. of English
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THE STATE OF PEER TUTOR TRAINING: WHAT WE ARE PRESENTLY DOING

The subject of peer tutoring at the college level has been studied in recent years by a wide range of specialists. A symptom of that may be illustrated by my first-hand experience within the last year. At two very different national conferences which I attended, the peer tutoring presentations were among the best-attended sessions there. In each case, at the CCCC meeting in Dallas, in 1981, and at the National Collegiate Honors Council meeting in Omaha, the audience paid the speakers the compliment of giving full attention and asking penetrating questions. Yet despite this and other evidence that a lot is already known about using peer tutors in varying academic settings, I continued to be nagged by the belief that there could be a lot more profitable sharing of information on the subject by professionals within my own discipline and across the curriculum who have successfully developed peer tutor programs. For example, one of the co-directors of the honors peer tutoring workshop at Omaha, Professor Lorraine Berlin, conducted a five-year study at the University of Michigan on the use of peer tutors in college nursing seminars; her results may be found in her 1979 doctoral dissertation titled Students Teaching Students: The Use of Students as Discussion Leaders and Models. But much of what she has ascertained could be directly applicable to using peer tutors in college writing programs, for example. I was unhappy that it was largely a matter of chance that I had been helped by a colleague in a very different discipline from my own. But then, I wondered, what did I really know about how colleagues within my discipline of college writing were using peer tutors? Additionally, at both national meetings it became clear to me that when a presenter used the phrase

"peer tutor," a wide spectrum of differing images formed in the mind's eyes of the listeners.

So I decided that if I wished to make a contribution to understanding the role of peer tutors at the college level I had better begin at home, within my own discipline. Shortly after the Dallas conference I set myself the task of determining, as far as possible, how today's college writing programs were selecting, training and utilizing peer tutors. My first challenge was to discover which institutions really fell within my target group of schools already using peer tutors in writing settings. But even if I were to ascertain that, how was I to reach them? Among other problems, there would be no funds to underwrite my basic research. Through the very generous offer of Muriel Harris, Editor of Writing Lab Newsletter, I was able to circulate a 16-item questionnaire in the November 1981 issue of that publication to her mailing list of some 1049 teachers and writing program directors located at approximately 500 institutions of higher education. The response to my appeal for help was extremely gratifying. 56 people representing a like number of schools answered that questionnaire by the Christmas 1981 deadline.

There really is no way to even guess how many institutions currently using peer tutors in writing programs either did not hear or did not heed my call for help. But of the 56 institutions responding, 54 currently use peer tutors in their writing programs and answered my questions fully. And that number seems sufficient to indicate both the range of training strategies currently being employed and some practices widespread enough to be deemed will-nigh standard. I am very pleased with the quality of the responses I received. And I ask you: what other strategy could I have employed for putting myself in touch with so many colleagues who were willing to talk on paper about their insights, experiences, data and assessments of the subject of peer tutor selection, training and usage? Reading their answers turned out to be a pleasure, not a tiresome chore.

The range of the responding institutions, by almost any yardstick, was veritably incredible. Geographically, the range was very wide. In all, 29 states were represented in this study. 31% of the respondents were from the east coast, 31% from the middle west, 17% from the south, 17% from the west coast, and

4% from the southwest. Moreover, the range of types of institutions within the study was equally wide: 30% of the respondents were from middle-sized state universities, 25% were from junior or community colleges, 20% were from four-year private colleges, 10% were from church-related schools, 10% were from major state universities, and 5% were from large urban colleges. A study that includes major state universities from Colorado, Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey and Tennessee; prestigious private colleges such as Harvard, Pitzer and Williams; historical black schools such as Lincoln and Tougaloo; Indian reservation schools such as Sinte Gleska of Rosebud, South Dakota; church schools of the Mormon, Nazarene, Presbyterian and Catholic faiths; large urban institutions such as Brooklyn College, the University of Akron, and the University of Toledo; and state colleges and universities from the four points of the compass--such a study cannot be said to lack range. Whatever else might be missing from a study not based on a random sample was more than made up for by the sheer number and variety of the types and locations of institutions represented in it.

I was essentially looking for two very different kinds of information in the answers to my questions: I wondered what practices, if indeed any, related to the selection, training, utilization and settings of peer tutors in writing programs would be widespread enough to be considered fairly standard in form. In other words, could my study provide a checklist of such standard practices for use by schools that were considering the addition of peer tutors to their writing programs? Five years ago, when my college was setting up its peer tutoring components in the Freshman Program, such a checklist would have been very helpful. On the other hand, I was equally interested in discovering what unique ways individual institutions had devised for tailoring peer tutor programs to their own peculiar needs. Fortunately, the results of my study rewarded my curiosity on both counts. Individual respondents took a great deal of care to answer my questionnaire fully. Many wrote explanatory covering letters; some included copies of teaching materials and other pertinent data. I am particularly indebted to Marcia Silver of Brooklyn College, Mildred Steele of Central College in Pella, Iowa, and Bill Middleton of the University of New Orleans for both the quality and quantity of their responses.

By this time you might well be wondering what questions I asked in my study. Well, quite logically, my first question was: "Do you use peer tutors in your writing program?" and actually two respondents, one from Auburn and one from Gettysburg College, bothered to answer "No!" I had had little hope that any subscriber to Writing Lab Newsletter whose institution did not presently use peer tutors for its writing courses would bother to spend time and the 20¢ to mail back an essentially blank questionnaire, but in this case I was mistaken.

Nothing would be more boring to me as a reader if I were next subjected to the statistics detailing the omnibus of answers to each of those fifteen portmanteau questions. Instead, what I would wish to read first (and hence, what you will read) is a summary of the data concerning practices sufficiently widespread to effectively constitute standard practice in college writing programs presently using peer tutors. Keeping in mind that no claims are being made for the scientific accuracy of this study, the following might almost constitute a profile of the typical college writing program's tutor.

By far, the majority of students tutoring in college English programs covered by this study, 69%, do so in Writing Labs, or Language Centers. They have been selected as tutors by their previous performance as writers (70%), by being recommended by a teacher or teachers (81%), and by an interview process (78%), usually all three. Being a tutor is considered a job at most institutions (89%), and with that designation, of course, goes remuneration, usually minimum wage. For the most part, the tutors are trained by a Writing Program Coordinator (who goes by that and a dozen similar names) both before and during the first semester they tutor (87%), and the following are the most widespread training strategies utilized: exchange sessions with other tutors, stressing successes and failures: 80%; specific reading assignments: 67%; training workshops: 63%; and training in small group work: 59%. (All respondents checked several training strategies.) In 65% of the cases, the Writing Program Coordinator grades or evaluates their performance. 85% of programs allow peer tutors to continue peer tutoring for an unlimited period of time. And among those teachers responding to this questionnaire, 80% considered their peer tutors to be an integral part of their writing program. 73% of the current peer tutors are estimated to

be women; and on 70% of the questionnaires, 80% or more of the tutors are said to be between the ages of 18-25, or, in other words, the so-called traditional college age.

Most of the foregoing results will not come as a great surprise to those of us who have been in writing programs which use peer tutors for the past several years (although I, for one, have been forced to realize once again that my own institution's use of peer tutors is rather unique). But you might well still wonder: what features mentioned by respondents, while not widespread, are nevertheless proving effective in various institutions of higher education? For after all, there ought to be a lot to be learned from the exceptions as well as from the rule.

Almost half of all peer tutors in writing programs do a large part of their work in Study Skills Centers, frequently as part of Student Special Services. Such "Drop-In" centers are often combined with tutoring services for Mathematics and/or Reading. Additionally, 46% of the respondents require that any tutor for their writing program must have received grades of A or B in all previous writing courses (and in 10% of the cases, the tutors must have been straight "A" writers). Fortunately for all of us, but especially for students receiving tutoring help, only 13% of the institutions included in this study make financial need a critical factor in choosing tutors. Quite a number of schools require writing samples of potential tutors before hiring them; some require a 3.0 overall academic average; and quite a few consider the desire of the potential tutor to be a tutor a key factor in the selection process. Numerous "psychic" rewards other than financial were cited by the respondents: the society of fellow tutors is seen as one such benefit; or the fact that tutoring gives training and experience that tutors value. In 41% of the programs studied, students take a peer tutoring course of from 1 to 4 credit hours, so there of course students receive a literal reward of the grade and the credit hours. In addition to traditional training methods, respondents reminded us that students learn from one another, both in the classroom and in the tutoring lounge; an increasing number of schools are using role-playing as part of their training; some help tutors analyze writing samples with the aid of professional staff; a few are beginning to utilize modern technology by having students observe their tutoring performances on video tape, to name just a few of the recent training methods

mentioned. Another example comes from my own program's training innovation: this semester, for the first time, we had our peer tutors act as observers of the holistic grading process we use to evaluate and place entering Freshman, all of whom write an essay as part of a battery of on-site placement tests. The tutors reported to us that even though they did not grade those essays, they began to feel more confident when they discovered that they almost always agreed with the placement of those students graded by our professional staff.

In a small number of institutions--six, my own included--English tutors work primarily for one teacher. I was disappointed to discover that only 11% of the institutions responding attempt to teach English writing teachers how to work with their department's aides, the peer tutors. Finally, one institution mentioned that its tutors are in part evaluated by the receivers of their largesse: the tutees, a tiny trend that I hope will continue to grow.

But enough of the cold statistics. The real voices of the respondents could be heard loud and clear when they answered question 14: "Do you consider peer tutors an integral part of your writing program?" The overwhelming majority of the respondents answered not only "Yes," but expanded on their approval with these comments: "Yes, they work with Basic Writing students, contributing to individualizing our program." "Yes, they are an integral part of our Writing Center, serving the English Department, the Writing Program, and the rest of the campus." "Yes. There are no others!" "Yes; one in three students at our school used the Skills Center last year." "Yes; they constitute 70-80% of our tutoring force." "Absolutely. We have a network; I am the top English staff person, and my tutors work with me." "Yes. Without peer tutors, our Center would not be able to serve one-fourth of the students who apply for help." "Yes. They supplement classroom and office instruction substantially." "Yes. They communicate well with their peers and understand their problems." "Yes. I can't imagine a writing program without peer tutors; our tutors gain immeasurably in poise, tact and confidence." "Yes. They teach over 400 students per quarter in skills, and another 800 walk-ins." "Yes. Our lab could not exist without them." "Yes. They assist, especially in Basic Writing, and students from all disciplines get their help." "Yes. Our peer tutors, along with

one professional teacher and an assortment of cassette tapes, comprise our entire writing assistance program." "Yes. Peer tutors are more approachable, less likely to be bored with Basic Writing, idealistic, and not burnt out yet!" "Yes. The Drop-in Writing Lab couldn't operate without them." "Yes. 500-600 students use our Center each semester." "Yes. The tutors are absolutely vital to the Writing Lab, and students are using the service." "Yes. Our tutors are teaching assistants; they can relate well to other students." "Yes. They do all the tutoring in the lab. They are trained well on the job, and they develop great client relationships." "Yes. Tutors work in classes or in our writing skills workshop, or both. The last is the ideal combination." "Yes. We would not be able to survive without them. They are an efficient, highly trained group of students." And, finally, my favorite comment: "Yes. They know more about the labs, the students, and the materials than any of the rest of us!"

But what about the 20% of those responding who said, "No; tutors are not an integral part of our writing program." Were they disenchanting, or if not, what function do tutors serve on their campuses? Six respondents answered "No" to question 14. Here, for example, is Harvard's answer: "No. In fact, the Writing Center is primarily for students who have already taken their writing courses." Pitzer's answer is similar: "No. The program is small, only in its second semester, and just beginning to attract students needing help with a paper in any discipline." It is not difficult to fathom why peer tutoring should be viewed as an ancillary service at schools such as Harvard and Pitzer, where the entering freshmen arrive usually with writing skills estimated to be among the top 5-10% of the national college-bound population's skills. Other "No" answers were couched in this sort of wistful language: "No. But they could be," or "No. Tutors are used as a referral service. They should be part of the Writing Program, but they are hired by Special Services, not the English Department." Actually, only one respondent dropped an unqualified, curt "No" into the empty space next to question 14.

From the answers to question 16, which read: "If the preceding questions do not get to the heart of your school's selection, education and utilization of peer tutors in your writing program, please explain briefly what your program consists of," the reader

could learn a great deal. One program director added this: "80% of the students using our skills center come voluntarily; two-thirds of the senior honors students used the skills center; and writing and spelling account for 66% of all our tutoring at the skills center." Another put it this way: "Our Basic Skills aides work one on one with teachers assisting; they help plan classroom activities." Yet another elaborated, "They work with writing samples; they are judged by comments they make on actual "problem-packed" papers and the responses they make in hypothetical center situations. We bring in special guests as part of their training." To another, "Peer tutors make it possible for well-motivated students to get as much training as they have time for. They also make it possible for us to have minimum standards for our program without boring 90% of the students in our classes." In one program, "Student tutors edit papers in the classroom in the student's presence, but are not used for grading those papers." One director put it beautifully: "If I select my tutors well, the education and utilization of each one can be as flexible and individualized as the tutoring that I expect of them." A respondent from a small community college had this to say: "Our program depends on peer tutors and two staff members who work at the writing program for one-fourth of their workload." One state supported school has its peer tutors working in two ways: "at a Writing Center, as part of an education course, and through Student Special Services, where they are supervised by an English professor." To a respondent from another college, "Our Writing Program is a drop-in center so far, but next year peer tutors will work systematically with English as a Second Language and Basic Writing students." Finally, one respondent summed it up for all of us who are grateful to have worked with peer tutors by saying this: "Our best tutors have been in classes using peer tutors where they believe strongly that their work is valuable."

I learned, then, a great deal from reading the responses to this questionnaire. And one of the personal benefits happened rather obliquely. The respondent from Brooklyn College, Marcia Silver, sent me a number of reprinted articles on peer tutoring, among which was one of her own in which she describes a series of progressively more complex critiquing practices she and her staff teach to potential peer tutors. As part of my teaching load, I teach a course in Freshman Honors composition, and in the second

semester of that course I subdivide my students into small writing groups one day a week during regular class periods. Each student brings to his group a writing which he reads aloud, and heretofore I had required my students to give one another verbal feedback, but after reading Silver's article "Using Peer Critiques to Train Peer Tutors," I decided to require my students to follow those critiquing criteria three times during the semester, resulting in useful written feedback. I mention this because, in our profession, we tend to emphasize peer tutoring's usefulness with remedial students, and it is easy to overlook the fact that very good students benefit from peer tutoring, especially at the hands of other gifted and talented students. Both my application of Marcia Silver's article, originally intended to help English Education curriculum developers, and the ramifications of Lorraine Berlin's dissertation on using Nursing seniors to teach the Freshman Nursing seminar, suggest that we have barely scratched the surface of helping one another across the curriculum.

An unspoken but implied trend that emerged from the responses to my study is the strong probability that peer tutors will be used more and more frequently, trained or untrained, in the very near future as state-supported institutions and private ones alike struggle to survive during this tight-money period threatening most institutions of higher learning, at the very same moment of history that the federal government is withdrawing its decade-long monetary support. As graduate Teaching Assistant jobs disappear, as retiring professors' positions are not re-filled, an increasing number of schools which wish to do an adequate job of helping students learn to write well will rely more and more heavily upon peer tutors. I trust that my colleagues will resist the temptation of creating economic and intellectual peons of those who offer the wide variety of tutoring services this study has suggested.

Increasingly, then, the necessity for and seriousness of the task of properly training peer tutors is being addressed. A recently published 70-page pamphlet put out by Networks, Bronx Community College, titled Critical Issues in Tutoring, contains materials on the philosophies of college tutoring in selected programs, a section on training tutors, selections from tutor manuals and handouts, sample forms for recordkeeping, and publishes the results of the 1978 Networks

tutoring conference. And as recently as the October 1981 issue of English Education, an article by William Evans, Past Chairman of the Conference on English Education and Professor at Purdue, urges English Education departments to get into the business of training English Education majors in Peer Tutoring to enable them to find jobs in today's elementary and secondary schools. There will be, then, increased use of peer tutors in college writing programs, and more sophisticated training programs for them. It is my hope that this study gives English departments a starting place from which to launch such efforts.

Lynne Loschky
Lincoln University



NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL WCA

Last November, the NWCA became an Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English. The NWCA was created out of the "Writing Centers Association" (now the WCA: East Central) in order to "foster communication among writing centers and to provide a forum for their concerns," beyond the East Central region.

All directors and staff of writing centers are invited to join the NWCA and, as they become established, one of the regionals that offers an annual regional conference and a chance to work within an association of colleagues from the member's geographical region. The NWCA is open to membership from all those involved in writing center work whether affiliated with a regional or not.

Membership dues this year are \$1.00 (they will go up after November). Send in your dues along with your name, school address, writing center position, and statement of your current interests and projects to Kathy Osterholm, Clarion State College, Clarion, PA 16214.

Members from all regions of the country elect a National Executive board, vote on Position Statements of the NWCA, and elect one or more members of the NCTE Board of Directors to represent interests of writing centers. Members may also serve on NWCA Committees.

The Executive Board, to be elected, this October will direct future activities of the NWCA including: (1) establishing a network among the regions for sharing of research and conference information, and (2) formulating position statements, for membership approval, on matters of professional interest to writing centers -- such as academic freedom, assessment and evaluation, professional status, training and development.

The first meeting of the new NWCA Executive Board will be held this November 21 at the NCTE Annual Convention in Denver. The NWCA is sponsoring a one-day conference at the Convention -- a full-day's program of papers and participant workshops for people involved with writing centers. The conference, entitled "MOVING OUT FROM THE CENTER", will include presentations on Writing Center-Based Research, Writing Center as the Hub of Writing Across the Curriculum Projects, Writing Centers and Teacher Training, and Computers in the Writing Center. In the afternoon, conferees will have a chance to participate directly in formulating guidelines for setting up writing labs in the high schools or a position statement on professional concerns of writing center directors and staff in colleges.

A copy of the full program will be included in next month's Writing Lab Newsletter, but put the date on your calendar now. NCTE members will receive registration materials in October. If you are not a member of NCTE, write for registration materials to: NCTE CONVENTION, 111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, Illinois 61801.

Nancy McCracken,
President
National Writing
Centers Association

If you plan to attend the Modern Language Association meeting in New York, you are invited to attend a session entitled "The Writing Center as a Context for Composition Research," scheduled for December 27, from 7:00-8:15 p.m. in Room 504 of the New York Hilton. Jeanette Harris will chair the session which will include three reports of research projects conducted in writing centers by Lil Brannon, Jeanette Harris, and Joyce Kinkead.

NEWS FROM THE REGIONS

Hard-working members of the NWCA have established several regional writing center associations offering annual conferences to members in their geographical regions--and beyond. With the exception of the Pacific Coast, all regions of the country have now established regionals or are in the process of doing so. The current list of regional associations and persons to contact about regional membership and conferences is listed below. If you are involved with a regional writing center group not yet represented by the NWCA, please write to me at the address listed at the end of this article so we can begin the affiliation.

WCA: East Central. Chair--Mary Devore, Ohio Northern University, Ada, Ohio 45810. (East Central includes the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, West Virginia, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan.) The annual conference is in May, next year at the University of Cincinnati.

Southeast WCA. Thomas Waldrep, University of So. Carolina, Columbia, S.C. 29208. Last February's conference was the 3rd annual.

Rocky Mountain WCA. Joyce Kinkead, Utah State University, Logan, Utah 84322. Last June, the first Rocky Mountain WCA Conference, was held at Utah State.

Midwest WCA: Doug Hunt, University of Missouri, Columbia, Mo 65211. 2nd annual conference October 21-22, 1983 at University of Iowa-Iowa City.

Texas WCA: Jeanette Harris, Texas Tech University, Box 4530, Lubbock, Texas 79409.

Mid-Atlantic WCA (In Progress) Marcia Silver, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11210.

New England WCA (In Progress) Harvey Kail, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469.

Members will be kept informed of NWCA and regional activities during the year through the Writing Lab Newsletter.

REQUEST: For an overview of Writing Center-Based Research to be presented at the Denver NWCA meeting and later shared with Writing Lab Newsletter subscribers, please send me brief descriptions of research conducted recently in your writing center or references to research studies that have interested you and should be included in the overview.

Nancy McCracken
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REPORT FROM THE WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION 5TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

May 5-6 The Writing Centers Association: East Central (our new name) met at Purdue University. The conference, chaired by Muriel Harris, was a great success. Over 165 writing center directors, instructors, graduate students and peer tutors gathered from throughout the East Central region and points as far west as Anchorage, Alaska and as far east as Florida and Maine. A few of the strong points listed on the Conference Evaluations by conferees may best describe the event for those who weren't able to attend:

"The gathering together of so many professionals who understand and appreciate each other's endeavors and achievements; the sharing of ideas and strategies; Lunch!"

"So many writing centers in varying stages of operation; many ideas to take back and work on."

"I appreciated the enthusiastic reporting of new ideas, research, and techniques and the contact with others who shared the unique problems of the writing lab."

"Excellent presentations; good variety of topics; scrumptious lunch--"

Besides the stimulating exchange of ideas

(and evidently good food!), one of the best features of the conference was the "What's New?" compilation of current projects and interests listed by all participants and quickly copied and distributed to everyone.

Many thanks to Mickey Harris and the staff at Purdue! If you missed out on the conference this year, you can order Conference Proceedings from Kathy Osterholm, Clarion State College, Clarion, PA 16214. The 320 page book will cost \$10.

Nancy Mc Cracken,
President
WCA: East Central

CALL FOR PAPERS

The SPRING 1984 (Volume 3, Number 3) issue of THE WRITING INSTRUCTOR will be devoted in part to questions in the evaluation of writing.

For this issue the Editorial Board of TWI solicits essays concerning theory, methods, and/or uses of evaluation in the service of the institution, the instructor (classroom teacher, tutor, or consultant), and/or the writer.

Deadline for submission is November 15, 1983. Please see Guidelines for Authors (in the front of every issue).

Address correspondence and manuscripts to:

The Writing Instructor
ATTN: Shirley K Rose, Spring 1984
Issue Editor
c/o The Freshman Writing Program
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA 90089-1291

The Delaware County Reading Council in Pennsylvania recently published a booklet, A Young Author's Guide to Publishing, designed to help elementary and secondary school writers get their works published in the most popular children's magazines. Guidelines, including length of articles, type of material accepted, and chances of being published, are given for twenty-four children's magazines. Copies, at \$2 each, can be ordered from Dr. Nicholas Spennato, Delaware County Reading Council, 6th and Olive Streets, Media, PA 19063.

CONFERENCE REPORT

The Midwest Writing Center Association held its first annual conference at the University of Missouri in Columbia on April 30, 1983. Forty-four people representing twenty-two colleges and universities attended the day-long activities, which featured an opening address by Lou Kelly (University of Iowa) followed by twenty-two small group presentations on topics ranging from training peer tutors to computer assisted writing. All the participants commented on the quality and range of these presentations. After lunch, Melody Daily (Central Methodist College) called the business meeting to order and immediately asked for a motion to form an organization. This motion and one to establish an annual conference passed unanimously. Lou Kelly volunteered her campus, University of Iowa, for the next conference.

After discussing issues concerning dues and adoption of the constitution, the following board members were elected:

- Chair Calvin Evans (Rockhurst College)
- Vice Chair Faye Vowell (Emporia State University)
- Treasurer Ian Cruikshank (Florissant Valley Community College)
- Recorder Doug Hunt (University of Missouri-Columbia)
- Archivist Elaine Hocks (University of Missouri-Columbia)
- Program Chair Donna Grout (Lincoln University)

At a June meeting, this board decided that the next conference to be held at the University of Iowa would take place on October 22.

Elaine Hocks
University of
Missouri-Columbia

FOR YOUR LAB'S REFERENCE SHELF

Research Associates has recently published WRITE THE "A" COLLEGE EXAM ANSWER, a 32-page booklet which explains how to study for and write essay exams. Copies, at \$2 each, can be ordered from Research Associates, 10 Puritan Lane, Swampscott, Mass. 01907. Complimentary examination copies might still be available.

SUPER TUTOR!

"Faster than a speeding comma! More powerful than an exclamation point! Able to leap split infinitives in a single bound! It's Super Tutor! Dressed as a mild mannered college student, he dons a pen in the early mornings, late afternoons, and sometimes even in the evenings, to aid fellow students in foiling the fragment, spoiling faulty subordination; fighting for grammatical truth, organizational justice, and the Great Writing Way!"

Sometimes, as I stumble out of the house for an 8:00 am tutoring appointment, I actually think such things to myself. I picture myself in a purple cape, winging my way over the waking city, seeking subtle sentence errors, alert for my chance to swoop down and save a dangling modifier or eliminate an obnoxious idiom.

I used to take such fantasies seriously. After all, I am too short to be the star quarterback of the football team. Too tone deaf to lead the marching band. So four years ago when the shocking purple flier called for my attention, shouting, "BE A WRITING TUTOR," I thought about it. As I read the rest of the message, "...Tutor students in writing for credit..." my mind raced. I conjured images of desperate students, their tears of frustration plopping onto blank pages, their hands shaking so badly they can hardly steady their pens, and their academic careers in danger of falling by the wayside if they fail the basic writing course this, their third time through it. Calmly, I take their hands. With a steady voice, I impart wisdom unto them, instill confidence, speak the Rules, and then watch my students stride back to their classes, stunning their teachers with "A" essays and receiving offers of publication.

My first quarter tutoring proved my fantasies did have a basis in reality. I experienced the shakey pens, the tears of frustration, and the fears of failure. The students I worked with also had these traumas. My Super Tutor fantasies were quickly obliterated.

Robin was one of my first students. She was taking the basic writing course on campus, Subject A, for the second time after

having failed it the previous quarter. She had considered herself a good writer in high school, but found herself unable to express herself adequately at the university. We spent the first four weeks of the ten week quarter trying to sort out her impressions of the readings, and write them down in some coherent form during our sessions. I urged, coaxed, prodded, joked, teased, scolded, exemplified, discussed with Robin, and devised exercises to loosen up both of us. Finally, by the fifth week, we were able to communicate freely with one another, and her ideas slowly began to leak onto paper. They appeared imperfectly though: in fragments, with dangling modifiers, with commas in all the wrong places.

We began to work together two and three times a week. By the seventh week Robin could organize her ideas around a thesis statement, but still stumbled expressing those ideas clearly. Sometimes in proofreading she could find her fragments and misplaced commas and dangling modifiers. Most often she could not. Her papers returned with encouraging comments and "D"'s. But Robin had committed herself to passing the course, and more important, to improving her writing, so she did everything I suggested and strained countless hours completing grammar exercises, writing in a journal, and re-reading assigned texts.

At the end of the seventh week she took an important in-class essay midterm. When we met the following Monday, Robin was excited. She had done well, she was sure; she was beginning to "get the hang of it!" My confidence soared. I felt good that our efforts were finally paying off--that I actually was helping her to succeed! I played on the moment and congratulated her on her efforts--see, she could do it.... For the first time in weeks as I walked home, Super Tutor fantasies pranced through my mind.

Wednesday, Robin showed me her returned midterm. While I read the encouraging comments and the "D+" grade, tears welled in her eyes. Dumbly I faced Robin's most articulate expressions of the quarter as they rolled down her cheeks, and dropped heavily onto her essay. I was flustered and frustrated. I was inadequate as a Saviour. Placing my hands on her shoulders would not "cure" her. Neither a magic word nor

super-human gesture existed in my realm of experience to help her. All we had were our human faculties and I understood, now, that maybe they would not be enough to get Robin through Subject A this quarter. Tutoring, I was learning, can be a slow, arduous process that mocks the unrealistic expectations I originally had.

When Robin passed the course with a "C-", there were no fireworks, no parades, no headlines. She thanked me for my help, but by then we both knew that if any heroism had been involved, it was her unceasing struggle to understand and improve her writing. On a campus of 30,000 scholars, Robin's and my experience was small, virtually insignificant. But from her perspective, and mine, her passing was a grand accomplishment.

I still experience satisfaction while helping students improve their writing. And also, I've experienced disappointment when students haven't improved their writing enough to pass their classes. Now, however, I recognize that failure with students is only one of the things that distinguishes me from Super Tutor. Super Tutor knew everything before he began saving people; he never had to learn to tutor effectively. Super Tutor never has a bad day, but should he happen to err, his mistakes are always reversible. Because Super Tutor is perfect, he never needs to become involved on an intimate emotional level with the fears, anxieties, frustrations, or triumphs of students. Super Tutor is recognized everywhere and gets headlines in the newspapers.

I bet, however, that Super Tutor does not fantasize. Fantasies are, after all, only human. I still catch myself soaring over college campuses across the country, huge purple initials "ST" emblazoned on a chest too small to be a quarterback's, dipping down and righting a dangling modifier, slowing a speeding comma, or lifting a scrawny essay to the heights of publication, all in front of 30,000 students crying,

"It's a bird!"

"It's a plane!"

"It's Super Tutor!!"

But at eight o'clock in the morning, I need more to keep me going, sometimes, than

satisfaction and one cup of coffee.

Gary Lichtenstein
University of California-
Berkeley

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CALL FOR PAPERS

The Midwest Writing Center Association will hold its fall conference at the University of Iowa in Iowa City on October 21-22. The theme of this year's conference will be "Writing--A Necessary Connection," and program chair, Donna Grout (Lincoln University), has invited papers on the following topics: integrated strategies for reading and writing, writing across the curriculum, language and cognitive development, the composing process, language as a learning tool, writing and technology, writing at all levels, tutor training, program, staff, and center evaluation. All presentations will allow time for informal discussion and questions, and all will offer practical suggestions and applications. Elizabeth Robertson and Lou Kelly will handle all local arrangements in Iowa City.

Direct proposals and questions to:

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314-751-2325 ext. 250 (office)
314-635-9047 (home)

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CLAC CALLS US "MUCKETY-MUCKS"

In the most recent issue (#9, Spring 1983) of CLAC (the publication of the Conference on Language Attitudes and Composition), there is a front-page report which expresses the editors' desire "to put CLAC under the nose of every test-maker, politician, state school official, textbook publisher, education reporter, teachers' union official, curriculum developer, writing center director, and other muckety-muck who ought to be reading CLAC but will probably never subscribe."

It's not clear how or why we've been relegated to "mucking around" with this motley group, but if you're curious, want more details, would like to retort, or perhaps want to subscribe to CLAC and thereby cut yourself off from all those publishers, politicians, and administrators that we are reputed to conspire with, write to CLAC, P.O. Box 825, Elmhurst, Illinois 60126.

WRITING CONTESTS AND WRITING LABS

For the second year now, the Writing Lab in the English Department at the University of Texas at Austin has held a freshman writing contest. It has been so well-received by the students, their teachers, and our administrators that I felt I should share the idea with my writing lab colleagues around the country. I believe that it is a particularly effective way of expanding our role within the academic community, brightening our image among students, taking our students' minds off mere grades and focusing them wholly upon the idea of good writing, if only for a short time. And, as we have found in our Writing Lab, writing contests are just plain ole' good fun.

Like most universities I imagine, the University of Texas has a good many writing contests, but all of them are open to all students regardless of class standing and none specifically for freshmen until our own. We have learned from two years of entries that in general they would not stand a chance in university-wide contests. Nonetheless, the freshman level is just the place where writing contests are needed, since (let's face it!) belletristic morale there can be so terribly low.

A few details about our contest. I was able to get gift certificates donated by the University Co-Op, a big university

bookstore right next to campus, and could offer prizes of \$100, \$30, and \$10 for first and second places and honorable mentions, respectively, in these three contest categories: the creative essay, the critical essay, and short fiction. The critical essay is, of course, argumentative or persuasive prose usually on important, controversial topics of the day; the creative essay is my term for that kind of "light," enjoyable, entertainment-oriented prose that we see a lot of in popular magazines. For judges, we have been fortunate enough to get locally prominent writers and editors from the Texas Monthly, a very popular magazine in this state and perhaps Texas' answer to a combination of New Yorker and Esquire. As you can imagine, the judges contributed some high gloss to our contest.

The first time we had the contest I was worried about plagiarism and was considering a "ready-writing" format, but our judges reassured me that they could spot a "ringer." Out of our freshman class of over 4000, we have gotten between 350 and 500 entries. We ask students to register in advance by a certain date for the contest; once we get the entries, several of us in the English Department get together and screen out the impossibly bad ones so that our judges who are busy professional writers and editors do not have to dive into a foot-deep stack of freshman papers.

To publicize the contest, I sent notices to all freshman composition instructors urging them to get their students to enter and slyly suggesting that it would be to their credit to have winning students. I encouraged teachers to sponsor and coach individual students and to get their classes to come as a group to the awards announcements to cheer on their classroom colleagues. We also encouraged students to come to the Lab with rough drafts of their entries for general help on and interested responses to their writing. All of this conferring and consulting of course was a good thing in that it got students, teachers, and lab staff members interacting over the issue of good writing rather than A's, and B's. In the meantime, I made sure that word of the contest found its way into the campus newspaper and onto bulletin boards around campus (particularly those near doorways often used by deans, presidents, chairpersons, and such).

At the awards ceremony, which is held in the last week of the semester, we have not had the kind of large, festive turnout we

had imagined so fondly, so the judges and Co-Op representatives have not come. Still, on both occasions we've had fifty or so students and teachers show up, among which there were one or two spirited classroom contingencies. As emcee, I've hammed it up, built up suspense, and relayed the judges' encouragement to these young writers to keep it up. And of course there was applause as the winners accepted their gift certificates, which included a diploma-like thing artfully done up by our ace departmental calligrapher.

Those of us who work in the Lab enjoy the contest because it changes, for however briefly, our students' orientation toward their writing: for once, all of their concern is directed toward stylistic and rhetorical matters rather than grades and teachers' expectations. It's fun to see what's on eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds' minds (the judges were struck this year by how often the theme of death and the fascination with grandparents appeared in the entries) and what they can do when they are not self-hamstrung by "English." Several teachers I know have since told me that they were genuinely flattered when some of their students asked their advice on their

entries. One curious thing: I found it quite interesting to talk to those students who adamantly did not want to enter the contest; next year I plan to do a survey of those who choose not to enter in order to see what this information can tell us about these students' images of themselves as writers.

I urge you to arrange a freshman writing contest at your school and have your writing center sponsor it. The writing lab is the right place to organize such things. Find yourself a benefactor--\$500 will do--and some local newspaper or magazine people to do the judging. Hype the thing up; bewilder your students with the notion that their writing can be good, that the contest is a VERY BIG DEAL, and that people really care about their writing. Get your fellow teachers into the act by stimulating some friendly, healthy competition among them over who can land the most winners. I think that you will find as we have that the contest will have a gratifying, salutatory, entertaining, and even liberating effect.

David A. McMurrey
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