

The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

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

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....from the editor....

Those of us who tutor are used to shifting our viewing angle as we look at writing from the perspectives of the writer, the class-room teacher, and the general reader. The authors of this month's newsletter articles also do some shifting of perspectives. David Taylor's article on the demands and rewards of tutoring are the result of his efforts to "see" what goes on in the real world of the peer tutor, from a vantage point inside that world. The world of graduate nursing students and their writing needs become the source of Mary Feirn's workshops in her Writing Lab.

In addition, Emery Roth II takes a fresh look at what computers can do for high school writers, and in this month's Tutor's Column, Rebecca Boswell, a peer tutor, writes her column from the perspective of a student in her small group workshop. Because of these authors' fresh perspectives, we have fresh insights into a variety of writing lab concerns. Fresh insights are always valuable, but for those of us caught in the frozen depths of winter, anything fresh is doubly appreciated.

Muriel Harris, editor

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Peer tutoring's hidden world: The emotional and social issues

Sometimes when tutoring in Moravian's Writing Center, especially at night when I'm not wearing my teacher-disguise of coat and tie, students come in and don't realize a teacher is present. They immediately drop their student-disguise, the one they've carefully developed over fourteen years of playing the school game, and become themselves- using their language, relating to each other in ways they never would with a teacher around, revealing parts of themselves that usually remain hidden to adult professionals.

And that was exactly the feeling I had when this first happened- that of discovering a hid-den world, a different writing center than the one I thought I knew. This night-time place had a much different feel than the day-time one, and represented a student-universe closed off to me. I wondered, "Is this the real world of peer tutoring? Are things happening here that make our adult-conceived training courses for peer tutors inadequate, perhaps irrelevant?"

Through tutor journals, writing assignments and my own sneakiness, I tried to understand more about this new writing center. What I learned was stunning. I thought, "What a fool I've been not to have seen this before!" But most (if all, I developed an appreciation for the emotional demands being placed on peer tutors, a new respect for this thing called "tutoring" and some insight into the ways peer tutors grow and learn in the crucible of a writing center.

Emotional Demands

Many of these we know all too well, especially how they can put a tutor between the proverbial "rock and a hard place":

There's the spontaneous "snack bar tutorial": "Hey you're a peer tutor (and my buddy), can you take a quick look at this for me?" Say yes, and you violate the rule against tutoring out of the proper context, become fair game for future such tutorials on street corners, library steps, and in every dorm lounge on campus. But, most of all, say yes and you give in to the student's apprehension about coming to the writing center and reinforce it as a place to be avoided. But saying no means disappointing a peer who needs help, possibly angering him or at least hurting his feelings.

Then there's the student who bursts in an hour before a paper is due and demands that it be proofread. Swallow your anger and say yes, and you become a proofreading prostitute, reducing the writing center to a fix-it center. Say no and you most likely lose the future chance to work with the student in a more productive way.

Both situations call for a calm explanation of the process of tutoring-together with large portions of hope that the anxious and angry student will understand.

Drunk students, high students, "I'm-to cool-to-care" students. Should you be an authority figure and tell them to leave? Or take the safe route, be a buddy and let them get away with such an obvious lack of respect for you, the place where you work, and the very reason for its existence?

This being scissored between two worlds is never more evident than with tutees who complain about their teachers. Some do it belligerently, others sob. And between their sobs you listen to how lousy the teacher is, how unfair, how intimi-

dating- often knowing that every word of it is true. Sympathizing means undermining the teacher, and ignoring seems inhumane. And even the standard line, "Well, the best thing for us to do is to work on this paper and make it your best," can seem inadequate.

Of course there's the ever-present fear that you might goof up and be the cause of someone's getting a bad grade, a fear that is often reinforced when a student returns with a disappointing paper, shoves it under your nose and announces loudly to the entire writing center, the entire world, "Thanks a lot! I did a lot better when I didn't come here."

There's the demand of flying from tutorial to tutorial on busy nights, with no break. One tutor summed this up well in a journal entry written at the close of such an evening: "It was a midnight dark and dreary, while I tutored weak and weary ... Had three hour-long ones in a row. Tutored two does and a Steve- and I'll be damned if I know who was who. This craziness can be infectious ... quoth the tutor nevermore."

There's the very special pressure of being constantly judged, not only by writing center directors (tutors are used to that from authority figures) but also by their peers, the very ones they're trying to help. The potential for failure in this context causes a heavy social pressure that directors can lose sight of. It's easy to forget that

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Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is eight to twelve double-spaced typed pages, three to four pages for reviews, and one to two pages for the Tutors' Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. Please enclose self-addressed envelopes with return postage clipped (not pasted) to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 45 days prior to the month of issue (e.g., Aug. 15 for the Oct. issue).

Please send all articles, reviews, announcements, comments, queries, and yearly donations to the editor.

tutors are students too, with all the attendant pressures that accompany trying to make good grades and please parents. Then tutors are asked to assume the added pressure of being responsible for a freshman who quite possibly couldn't care less about writing.

Finally, there's the demand for tutors to become involved with the emotional struggles of their students. Tutors must deal with defensive, even hostile students, and those with no self-confidence, who sit there crying, so fearful of writing that they're totally blocked- and all that fear and distress gets dumped right in the tutor's lap. The tutor must call upon her empathy and own emotional stability to handle the situation, becoming in effect a peer counselor. And as the student begins to open up, the tutor sees the real reason for doing poorly- "I hate writing," the student says, "so I ignore the assignments until the last moment and do them quickly as I can." It's clear that the student needs not just writing strategies, but an ego-boost, someone to offer an encouraging word, someone who sees another person in emotional distress and can respond.

Growth

The other side of these pressures is the learning and personal growth that the tutor experiences because of them. It's news to no one that peer tutors grow as writers just as much as their tutees do, especially in the ability to look critically at their own writing. And there's the growth in personal confidence, too, because others believe in them, trust and depend on them, because they are constantly meeting new people and being forced to form a positive, helping relationship with them. These are significant personal and social skills, and we shouldn't downplay them. But they are only part of a larger process of growth that peer tutors go through.

Take, for instance, the demand to become involved with one's students on an emotional as well as intellectual level. One of my tutors commented how rare it is that students spend a concentrated amount of time sharing ideas, thoughts, and emotions in an intimate setting. As she put it, "There's something special going on in here, even if it is only for a few hours."

That "something special" is, in part, the bonding that takes place between tutor and tutee. This bond has a humanizing effect on the tutor and promotes altruism and pride in oneself,

one's fellow students, even one's school. I remember this journal entry from one tutor: "Incredible. Martin got a B. I'm so proud of him. I think what I like most about him is his sincerity about wanting to write well, to improve for now and in the future. All of us in the Writing Center are proud of him. Martin, Paul, Patty and others like them aren't just tutees; they're friends in a real sense. And when one of them hurts, I hurt. But when one of them flies high, so do I."

There are few places in college where students so regularly experience these out-of-self feelings, this sense of commitment to others and intimacy with them. The gripes about the self-centeredness of this generation sound cheap and hollow in light of these peer tutors, who can develop a genuine sense of ownership of their tutees and their school. You can hear it in phrases like, "It's been a good semester; my students have made so much progress." Or, "I feel like an important part of the College because I'm doing something worthwhile that is benefiting not just me, but others as well. I didn't always have such a positive attitude toward school, especially this one."

A sense of belonging, of feeling needed and worthwhile, of finding fulfillment beyond one's own immediate pleasures- these feelings are unique to people who have tapped into an important value system. They are finding purpose and meaning outside of themselves, instead of, like so many, remaining trapped in the pit of self, cut off from the world around them and others in it. These tutors are learning to think and live outside the narrow confines of ego- and that's a step toward the maturity and happiness that are part of the hidden world of peer tutoring.

There's also political growth. The tutoring process, removed from the graded classroom, has the potential to put the focus on learning as something important and valuable in and of itself. In a peer tutor writing center, students can escape the grade trap. They can learn to write better simply because that's important and good. Doing so is an important step in the tutor's growth, as well as the tutee's, and can give both a vital sense of power.

One tutor wrote: "Tonight I was so surprised to see the improvement in the way my student structured his sentences in his new es-say, I had done that. I was responsible for something positive and concrete, It made me feel real." I submit to you that, after fourteen to sixteen

years of virtual powerlessness as a student, this tutor had discovered a sense of control over her education. She had just become a power player in the politics of education.

Listen to the rumblings of power that underlie the pride this tutor feels: "Tutoring not only reinforces what I should know about good writing: it also gives me the chance to do something-to help someone with a difficult task and see them grow and become better at it. It's great to see students improve to the point where they come back to show you what they did well and you know that they can do it now themselves. I almost feel like a mother bird that can one day let her young fly on their own."

That was written by a burly young man who played offensive guard on Moravian's football team. It's clear that both he and the first tutor no longer see themselves as helpless students whose own fates and the fates of their tutees lie in the hand of an all-powerful teacher. By working with other students in a writing center, they have discovered their own ability to take charge and to make a difference. They are involved with their educations in a way they've never been before. They are generating their own authority, and it emanates from writing centers all across the nation.

But by far the most prevalent problem for my tutors is the apathetic student caught on the academic assembly line, the one who's learned to care only about grades, not about learning. These students often don't want to be in the writing center, much less be asked to respond to a tutor's questions. And why should they? They sit in a day after day, told what to think, what to feed back on a test. Why should it be any different in a tutorial? Recalcitrant, defensive, withdrawn-these are the students who really make tutors earn their stripes. In other words, the ones who really make tutors grow.

A tutor's first reaction is to say, "Well, If he doesn't care, why should I?" And that's natural. But the good tutor also perceives that the student is merely trapped, a victim of apathy generated by the system, possibly by parents who try to control their child's life. The grid tutor finds ways to bring the disenfranchised, uncaring student into the tutorial. And it's by having to interest tutees in their own work that the tutors practice over and over generating enthusiasm for the process of learning as it happens between two peers. Learning comes out of the academic closet and enters the social dimension of college life, the real world

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of these students, their own private world that adult professionals aren't a part of. As a result of this transformation, the learning becomes more personal and more real. Tutors must say it over and over: "Writing is important. It's not just the grades but what you learn here, tonight, with me. Your ideas are important, they deserve to be written down- and done so well."

As a result, I think we're creating a new breed of learners in our writing centers. There's a new and more positive attitude toward school taking shape there, one that is sorely needed. These tutors are learning about sensitivity and caring, about commitment to learning and to each other. But most of all they're discovering a sense of control over their own educations, a sense of power that has nothing to do with teachers or the grades they give. And because of that, in the intimate, collaborative setting of a peer writing center, the chains of apathy are being shattered for some students, for the first time in their lives.

I think this new attitude is summed up well by this tutor's comments: "So many of the students who come to the Writing Center actually think of their papers as possessions of the teacher, not theirs. So they're really not interested in it-they just want it fixed for the teacher's sake, for the grade's sake. I do two things: First, I let the student know that he/she is not in a classroom anymore, but here with us- friends, peers. Second, I assure the student that he does have control over that paper. Some must think I'm pretty weird getting excited overwriting a paper. But that's OK, because I know that the majority believe that the paper is theirs, not the teacher's, and they have ideas that are theirs, and language that is theirs, and so want to do a good job out of pride. That's tutoring for me."

Frankly, it's also what scares many class-room teachers. These tutors have awakened a sleeping giant by giving back their tutees pride and control. And whether they are aware of it or not, these tutors and their students are now involved in a struggle for their share of power in a college's political structure, the outcome of which could determine the status of the next generation of writing centers. Along the way, a tutor is assured of at least one thing: being challenged emotionally, socially and intellectually- and growing as a human being because of it.

David Taylor
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Bethlehem, PA

[Editor's note: David Taylor also wears another

hat- or wields a different pen- as an aficionado and creator of horror fiction. He has taught a course in horror fiction, writes a column for *Horrorstruck*, and has published stories in *Fantasy Tales*, *Grue*, and elsewhere.]

Writing in health science: A short course for graduate nursing students

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, approximately fifty percent of the students using The Writing Lab every semester are in upper-level or graduate courses. One group of graduate students who consistently use our services are the registered nurses enrolled in the School of Nursing's master's program. With the completion of the University's Center for Health Sciences in 1975, this program grew to what is now a steady enrollment of 100-125 students. A majority of these are part-time students returning to school after some absence, which accounts for some of the uncertainty with writing that they experience. The large amount of writing they are required to do in this program and the nature, organizational structure, and style of writing in nursing pose the greatest obstacles to their success.

In 1976, approximately one-third of all graduate students coming to the University's Writing Lab for individual writing conferences were graduate nursing students. After working with many of these students individually, I began to wonder if small-class instruction wouldn't be a more efficient way of helping them to understand the nature of the writing tasks they needed to complete in their graduate program. A short course could help them with common problems that specific writing assignments always seemed to present, leaving tutorial conferences for discussion of sophisticated writing problems and individual needs. I had seen the same types of logical error, lack of analysis, absence of coherence, wordy phrases, and inconsistent documentation in a sufficient number of their papers to prompt this opinion. I now needed to choose from among these and other shared problems those areas that could be effectively addressed in a short course.

To help me decide what specific topics to cover, I turned to certain readily available sources. Over the course of several years, I had collected drafts- both good and unacceptable- of the types of papers graduate nursing students write in

required courses, as well as drafts of their theses, articles, and research projects. These helped me to narrow my focus and to decide which were major and which were minor problems. I met with members of the graduate nursing faculty to ask them for their perceptions of their students' writing. Their comments and expectations helped me to determine how much class time should be spent on organizational skills, analytical skills, and mechanical skills. Nursing journals and other journals in allied health and the social sciences proved to be as revealing as my students' papers. Many journal articles displayed the same types of stylistic problems I saw again and again in students' writing. Such articles helped to pinpoint which areas of style I should give the most attention. Finally, comments from nursing students I was currently seeing and my tutorial notes from previous semesters enabled me to further categorize the specific types of help this group of students most often sought. My reason for wanting this class to be closely related to their writing in nursing was that this group of students shared certain demographics characteristics: many had young children, most were part-time students, and a majority were practicing nurses who often worked rotating shifts. In other words, although so many had demonstrated through their lab visits that they were anxious to succeed in this rigorous graduate program, I doubted that this very busy group of students would regularly attend a short noncredit course that provided general writing

The short course that eventually emerged to help this group of students was offered for the first time in Spring, 1984. An evening and a daytime section were made available to accommodate those students working rotating shifts. The course ran for six consecutive weeks early in the semester to help students prepare for their course papers, which are usually due in the last two or three weeks of the semester. Twenty-five students came regularly, their positive course evaluations supporting my belief that this short course was indeed effective in helping them. The graduate faculty saw some marked improvement in their students' papers, which led the graduate nursing program to approve funding for preparation and instructional time and for class materials. Although our policy is to provide free writing instruction to all students, faculty, and staff, our Writing Lab has received and does receive financial compensation from schools and programs whose students come to us in large numbers or require extraordinary planning and teaching time. Since its conception four years ago, this short course has been attended every semester by at

least one-quarter of the nurses enrolled in the master's program; evaluations by students and feedback from faculty help to update the class when necessary, but basically its focus and methods remain the same.

How specifically does this short noncredit writing lab course meet the disciplinary needs of a group of graduate students? Its success with nursing students suggests that it could be a model for other short courses designed to help graduate students with writing in disciplines such as psychology, occupational therapy, social work, pharmacy, and education. The following sections include a description of graduate nursing students, the types of writing they do, the problems they encounter, and the materials and teaching techniques used in class to help them solve these problems.

Nurses and other writers

Since the 1950's, the role of the nurse has changed drastically from doctor's helper to, in the case of the intensive care nurse, doctor's expert. The additional responsibilities placed on nurses in the workplace today have sent many back to school- back to graduate school, especially-where their education emphasizes problem solving, decision making, and participating in nursing research. These activities ultimately require the graduate nursing student to write. A well-documented thesis and a published paper add to the existing body of nursing knowledge. As this body increases, it supports nurses as true professionals and diminishes their image as para- or semi-professionals. All nonclinical courses have a writing component, and unlike some others, this program continues to require both a comprehensive final exam and a master's thesis or final project. Prior to write the thesis or project paper, the student does an extensive review of the literature, drafts a proposal for the approval of the Human Subjects Committee, and does primary research on topics as wide-ranging as the effects of suctioning on Infants with bronchopulmonary dysplasia or coping with declining visual function in old age.

Nurses have an unusual potential for becoming good writers because of their socialization into the nursing process and its similarities to the writing. In caring for patients, student nurses by following a four-phase process: they must assess, plan, implement, and evaluate. They are taught that this process is not linear but circular, that they may need to repeat these

phases in order to provide quality care to their patients. A comparison can be made between the well-cared-for patient and the well-written paper, All would-be writers need to understand that a paper does not just appear: it is the result of a circular process which engages the writer for some time. Nurses brought this "mind set" into the writing class. When they discovered that what they had been practicing for years on "patients" is inherent In writing a paper, they had more "patience" than other students with prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

Writing tasks that challenge graduate nursing students

Before they attain the degree of Master of Science in Nursing at the University of Wisconsin-M a n , graduate nursing students do a great deal of writing. They write annotated abstracts, case studies, argumentative course papers, informative course papers, surveys of literature, take-home exams, articles for journal submission, a four-hour comprehensive final exam, a proposal. and a master's thesis or project paper. Each of these presents its own set of challenges, but students consistently find the following tasks especially demanding.

Introducing the Problem Statement: Journal articles in the health sciences generally begin with a problem statement which provides sufficient background to establish the problem: the significance of the problem to a particular group of clients, or to health care providers, or to society, or to all of these: the writer's perspective on the problem: and a purpose statement or research question. The phrase, "problem statement," often misleads students because it can be a few sentences or several paragraphs long depending on the nature of the problem. It maybe very objective as in the write-up of laboratory research, or it may be relatively subjective as in the discussion of moral issues related to controversial health care treatment. To write an acceptable problem statement, a student must reduce the paper to its essence, which requires analytical skill and some knowledge of logic. Students must also provide appropriate documentation for their problem and point of view, a problem in itself when there is a mass of literature or none at all to cheese from.

Reviewing the Literature: Material from the literature is integrated into all writing in nursing and other health sciences. (Summary abstracts are an exception.) Nursing students

learn early in their graduate career that the knowledge they have gained from years of nursing experience must be supported in their written work by citations from published text, preferably recent journal articles. Therefore, almost every-thing they write is generously "peppered" by frequent references. Reviewing the literature can be time-consuming and frustrating for students until they learn to use headings and sub-headings, predictive and summary sentences, and transitional words and phrases. A review is tedious to read unless it has a visible "skeleton," which means that studies must be grouped according to meaningful "common denominators" or themes. Papers easily lose coherence when every paragraph begins with the name of a researcher or theorist and the links between them are missing or buried. Problems with clarity result when students fail to distinguish between their generalizations and those of the researchers they are reviewing.

Making Recommendations For Research and Practice: Another integral part of writing in nursing is a discussion of a topic's relationship to nursing research, practice, or education. Such discussion precedes or becomes a paper's conclusion. Students who ignore this important part of their paper are accused of leaving their readers "hanging." The recommendations section usually reiterates methodological problems and gaps in the research and suggests some new directions for future research. It also points out the Implications research holds for nurse educators and practitioners, often providing guidelines for Implementing new programs or techniques. Here again, the nurse writer must explain the connections between a specific nursing concern and broader issues. If students do not distance themselves from their topic, they tend to over generalize or to justify a recommendation with a side issue.

Editing For C : Writers in the health sciences strive for objectivity, but too many achieve only a cumbersome style of writing. Often graduate nursing students attribute their inability to analyze an article to their lack of knowledge rather than to the author's wordiness or use of jargon. After reading pages and pages of unnecessary words and phrases, some students believe it is appropriate to write in this style. This problem afflicts many other graduate students, but it has special consequences for nurses. Nurses with advanced degrees are educated to be primary communicators of nursing knowledge. They are specialists who after leaving graduate school will most often write for a reader less educated than

they are. Their research needs to be understood by Associate Degree nurses, licensed practical nurses, and freshmen in undergraduate nursing programs. Their guidelines need to reach the families of transplant patients and teen-age mothers. Therefore, they will always be faced with the task of editing for clarity (and brevity).

Course Materials and Teaching Techniques

Course Materials. Approximately 100 hand-outs were especially developed for this class and these provide the basis for class work and discussion. One week before each class session, students pick up a set of materials to read and prepare. Some hand-outs use excerpts from nursing papers and articles to illustrate grammatical and stylistic problems. Others explain how to diagram a paper, how to integrate commentary into a review of literature, or how to substitute a word for a phrase. All hand-outs use nursing content and focus on the writing problems that appear frequently in nursing papers. Since these students are unfamiliar with the tone and structure of papers written by graduate nursing students, they are anxious to read and discuss the work of previous students. With the approval of the graduate faculty, students in this class read and analyze course papers, student articles, and master's theses for strengths and weaknesses. Students are encouraged to purchase the APA Manual as a reference for documentation and editorial style and to become familiar with a grammar handbook of their choice.

This class meets in our lab's computer classroom to familiarize students with our computers. Students have an opportunity to practice using WordPerfect, the standard word processing program in the School of Nursing. They are provided with class disks on which grammatical and stylistic problems have been entered for their revision. The instructor's computer is linked to the fifteen computers available to students, enabling the Instructor to send messages as students work or to send the work of one student to all others.

Teaching Techniques. Five years of experience with this course have reinforced my belief that humor is an excellent teacher. For example, graduate nurses have always reacted positively to comparing samples of good and bad writing that good-naturedly satirize the health care system. Similarly, a dangling modifier that places a doctor in a humorous position illustrates the grammati-

cal rule so that they will not easily forget it. Other successful sources of humor have been pompous diction, anonymous student papers, and examples from distinguished medical journals.

Graduate nursing students also respond to analogy, perhaps because they so often use it as a teaching device with their patients: ("the heart is like a pump. ..1. Analogies used in class have compared the purpose statement and topic sentences to "umbrellas" under which all family members must stand. The stem of the umbrella extends to the end of the paper, with each rib representing a relevant issue. When one rib is broken, the umbrella loses its shape and its effectiveness. Headings and subheadings are family members prominent enough to control the family's thought and action. And just as the introduction promises a "menu" which the body must "serve," the conclusion provides the "dessert," a topping that makes the paper especially memorable or insightful.

A technique for testing organization is diagramming the problem or issue to see if the student's plan illustrates logical relationships among topics and between topics and the overall focus. Graphics work well because graduate nursing students are encouraged to use figures and charts in their writing to convey comparisons and structural concepts. Other successful techniques include peer critiques of student papers, group writing, and group revision using the computer.

Conclusion

Nurses in the School of Nursing's graduate program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison need to develop sophisticated analytical, organizational, and mechanical writing skills to meet the demands of its rigorous writing-centered curriculum. Most graduate nursing students attend school part-time as they continue to practice their profession. Nurses write a great deal everyday, but mostly in single words, phrases, and symbols. Therefore, they must learn or relearn how to construct grammatical sentences and well-developed paragraphs and to organize masses of data into a meaningful paper. Our Writing Lab's short course is designed to help them accomplish these writing tasks and to complement the instruction they receive in individual writing conferences.

In their evaluations of this short course, students say that they have benefited from the use of nursing content to exemplify their common

writing problems. They believe that familiar vocabulary and excerpts from student papers and nursing articles have helped them to assess the strengths and weaknesses in their writing as well as in the studies of researchers and other nursing authors. More importantly, students believe that this course has taught them that they must write with clarity, coherence, and conciseness if they expect to share their specialized knowledge with diverse health care consumers and providers,

Mary Feint
University of Wisconsin
Madison, WI

Call for Papers Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition

Richard Ohmann, George Dillon, Erika Lindemann, George Hillocks, Cynthia Selfe, and Charles Bazerman will be among the featured speakers at the eighth Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition next July 12-15 in State College, Pennsylvania.

Persons interested in participating are invited to present papers, demonstrations, or workshops on topics related to rhetoric or the teaching of writing—on composition, rhetorical history and theory, basic writing, technical and business communication, advanced composition, writing across the curriculum, and so on. One-page proposals will be accepted through April 15. Contact John Harwood, Department of English, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802.

SOUTHEASTERN WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATION

CALL FOR PAPERS
APRIL 13-15, 1989
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

Presentations may take the form of papers, workshops with group participation, videotapes or other demonstrations. Length: 15 minutes, 30 minutes, or 1 hour. Submit abstracts of papers or descriptions of other presentations, by January 15, 1989, to Jim Knox, Coordinator of Harriman Writing Center, Roane State Community College, Harriman, Tennessee 37748. (615-354-3000, Ext. 4241)

Tutors' Column

Leaders making leaders

[The author of the following article is a writing tutor in the Student Learning Center, University of California at Berkeley. In this piece, she sheds the role of the tutor and writes from the viewpoint of a student in her writing workshop. These work-shops are small groups of about eight students in freshman composition courses who, among other things, comment on drafts of each other's essays. The writing workshop leader (Becky) is more facilitator than teacher.

Thom Hawkins, Coordinator, Tutorial Services in Writing, University of California at Berkeley

Six weeks ago nine students gathered in a small room. Eight sat quietly, glancing at one who shuffled papers and scribbled notes. I thought she was the teacher for the workshop, as she was the only one without wandering eyes. Then she spoke, and all eyes immediately focused on her. She asked a question, and all eyes dropped as silence invaded the little room. She rephrased the easy question. But still, no one spoke. I was certainly not going to be the first to speak; someone else more comfortable with speaking could do it, not me. In desperation, she asked us to describe ourselves and eventually got us to whisper our names, home towns, and academic interests. Finally the hour was over.

During our next workshop, we sat silently staring at our teacher until a young man distributed a paper he had written. After he read his essay aloud, the teacher asked us what we liked...(no answer); what captured our attention. . . (no answer); and where we thought the essay could be strengthened. . . but still- no answer. The paper was good, probably as well written as one of mine, although I did find a few problems in it. But I was absolutely not going to offer my opinion. What if I was wrong? I was not going to speak out and risk sounding like an idiot. I was sure others had ideas. They could speak first. But no one spoke, and that cold silence invaded our room again. I kept my head down, pretending to concentrate on the essay, but frequently raised my eyes to see the others' responses. The reader was fidgeting, wrinkling his paper and sinking lower and lower into

his chair. The teacher was just looking at us, waiting for us to speak. How long would the silence continue? The nervous energy was multi-plying with each passing moment. I remembered the teacher proclaiming, "This is your workshop and you should take initiative in speaking and express anything you desire," but after all, she was the "leader," and it was her job to start our conversation. Silence still. Would anyone ever speak? Why didn't she say anything? By now it was obvious no one would comment, but she made us suffer through the silence anyway. I began to feel like a child caught with my hand in the cookie jar, searching my imagination for an explanation, not knowing what to say. She finally spoke. But her words only formed another question. Silence again. Then another question. Finally the young woman sitting across the table answered. But the leader did not speak to her. She just looked at us. A young man courteously responded, letting his fellow student know she was alive. I then commented on his response. Eventually most of us spoke-conversing at last! Although our discussion was brief, and that familiar silence frequently crept into our little room, we had an intellectual conversation about the essay. No one was ever wrong either. Our leader always commented on the value of our comments and intricate observations. She even broke in once, emphasizing something I said!

Weeks passed, as we continued the same routine: someone read an essay and received a few comments with intervals of that dreadful silence. I knew the routine and grew accustomed to the silence until my turn to distribute an essay arose. I almost skipped the meeting in which we discussed my essay. Even though I had written, typed, and copied my essay, I felt unprepared because I was unsure of my ability to handle criticism. Despite my fears, I bravely entered the room that day, sat down and plopped my soul in a pile right in the middle of the table. I was so nervous about my peers seeing the essay that I did not think about the horror of reading it aloud. Everyone arrived more promptly than ever that day and was quickly ready to attack my essay. I pulled together every bit of confidence and quietly cleared my throat. As I began reading, my voice

cracked and my face burned. The words on the page blurred from my shaking hands, but I did not need to see them- I knew exactly how that essay read. After all, it was my heart, my soul and my intelligence right there in front of everyone in perfect, little, black letters on crisp, white sheets of paper. As I continued reading, the pain did not ease. I read faster and faster until I could hardly catch a breath. Why I wanted to finish so quickly escapes me now, as I distinctly remember the horrifying silence that followed.

Why didn't they speak? Did they find my work so terrible that they decided not to waste their breath trying to help me fix it? The silence remained. Never before had I heard silence. But that day, within the stillness, my soul screamed. (Devastated by the silence, I decided not to let my peers experience the pain I suffered. In the future, I would disrupt and destroy that silence by speaking out.) A young woman finally spoke. My face cooled as all eyes lifted from my essay and flashed to her. I anxiously awaited each comment. The good filled me with confidence, and I resented the bad. My anger grew out of my inability to produce a flawless paper, not from the constructive criticism I received. And although I was disappointed with my hideous errors, I left with an exhilarated feeling of accomplishment.

After that day, I spoke with fewer inhibitions, and our workshops seemed to become progressively more complex and less burdened by silence. For me, the progression began with the discussion of my essay, because everything I had previously concealed from this group was laid out for them in writing. I noticed an increase in participation from others as each took a turn to exhibit his or her soul. Now silence rarely visits our room. In fact, a few of us fight for speaking space, and sometimes we become so involved in a discussion that we forget our leader is in that little room.

Rebecca Howell
Writing Tutor
University of California at Berkeley

A reader asks.....

I would like to see articles in the Writing Lab Newsletter which share specific strategies for working with dyslexic students.

Veta Hildebrand
North Tama Co. High School Traer,
Iowa

A reader comments. . .

I liked the informal case study, "Working with Charlotte," in the November 1988 issue of the Writing Lab Newsletter because it is a different kind of article and because it gives some needed attention in print to the tutee.

Jim Bell
University of Texas
Austin, Texas

**Computer miracles and
tutor restraint**

Computers are magic. So long as they remain so, writing teachers will have an invaluable ally in their work. Not long ago the truth of this was reaffirmed for me. It was a slow day in the new computer writing center in which I teach. I was preparing a talk which I was to give the following day, when I noticed a sixth grade special ed student at the computer next to me. He was known to be a weak English student, and I might have been impressed by the finished looking paper on the computer screen in front of him, but I have already become used to the increased output of even some of our least verbal students. What had attracted my attention was that all the while I had been working on my notes, he had been searching through a dictionary (we leave one on each computer) checking the spelling of every questionable word in his paper. This rare student behavior had been prompted by the new spell checker which I had recently added to the writing center. Indeed, as spell checkers go, it was very slow. Students who know how to spell preferred to check the old fashioned way, but we had decided that any spell checker used in our center should not offer the students suggested spellings. Students are more likely to retain correct spellings that they look up and retype. The only way we could accomplish this was to seriously modify a copy of Pinpoint's "Document Checker," an AppleWorks add-on. I had spent several days digging into the program to disable and conceal the feature of the program that provided possible spellings. No trace of its distance remained. My sixth grade student was enjoying watching the broad cursor as it bounced from word to word in the paper he had just finished. Periodically the cursor would stop at a word it didn't know, and my friend would dig into his dictionary to check its spelling. He must have repeated this thirty-five times. No amount of red ink would have prompted him willingly to this

behavior, and the resulting paper was right because he had made it so, not because he had followed a teacher's red tracks through his "bad words." Indeed, the bouncing cursor was magic because it put a perfectly spelled paper within his grasp. Similarly, I have watched older students who normally would have little interest in word selection reach for the thesaurus which sits beside the dictionary on each monitor. For a variety of reasons, all these students had been enchanted by the computer. All were voluntarily initiating their own learning and learning for the fun of doing.

In our school of nearly 600 students, ten computers keep our students writing and learning while the tutor gives individual help to one or answers quick questions of many. In seven periods of forty-five minutes, a typical day, we are visited by anywhere from fifty to one hundred students. More than 7500 visits have been made to the center in the eight months since we opened, even though there are still ten periods each week in which we lack writing teachers to run the center. By next year we hope to have enough staff to open our writing center every period of the teaching day. Once this has been accomplished, our need will be for more computers rather than more tutors. Extended tutoring reaches relatively few students, but extended computing has increased the time all of our students spend writing. Accordingly, we have created a writing place in which computers and writing help are available for our students at their request. They receive passes from class and study hall to come to the writing center and write. During any period the center is open, one is likely to see every computer station filled. The most poorly behaved students sit diligently in front of their screens as they never have to front of their texts. They write papers and stories, letters and nonsense, but they write. They write more than they have ever written in their lives, and no one has to force them to sit still. Sometimes they ask for help, not as much as we would like, but we are content to develop the tutoring habit slowly, and so we wait until they want us before we help.

We have designed the center to promote the students' independence. Copies of our specially edited AppleWorks integrated word processing program and Pinpoint spell checker stand ready in disk envelopes attached to the wall behind each computer. After only one or two sessions of forty-five minute instruction, most students (grades 6-12) are ready to perform basic word processing activities on their own. As al-

ready mentioned, on top of each monitor is a paperback dictionary and thesaurus. Every student receives his own data disk the first time he comes to the center. Data disks are stored alphabetically in a disk cabinet, and normally the student who enters the center first signs in, then goes and gets his data disk, and finally sits down at a computer to write. At the end of a session, he puts all disks away, signs out and leaves. All data disks remain at the center. Specially prepared ditto help sheets are stacked on top of the disk file for any student who forgets a particular routine. They cover topics such as booting up, setting up standard page layout, spell checking, and using basic AppleWorks commands. Additional programs are available by request from the teacher, but in all other ways, the activities of the center are student-run. In a typical session, most students can complete their work without ever requesting help from the teacher.

There are undoubtedly many things that we may not be able to teach our computers to do. Indeed, after three years of search, we still find relatively few programs for the Apple IIe that do all we want them to, though programs are beginning to be developed. We long for programs that will combine checkers that find sentence fragments and run-ons, errors in agreement, weak verbs, passive voice, vague language, and other sign-posts of poor student writing. Such programs must work with the students' knowledge and not demand a new vocabulary or a new conceptual structure, and they must teach by calling on the student's judgment in making revisions. They must recognize the errors that our students make while not encumbering them with other kinds of errors. Too few checkers recognize that the errors of high school students are different from those of elementary students, college students, EFL students, or adult writers. MECC, the "Sensible" people, and other software producers have not yet addressed themselves sufficiently to these problems. We writing teachers are not likely to lose our jobs too soon.

As I sat watching my sixth grade friend, it occurred to me that I ought to go over and offer my help in revising other elements of his paper, but I resisted the temptation. I didn't even read over his shoulder to see what help was needed. Any assistance now would have made his effort less, not more. Indeed, it is the genius of the computer, when properly used, to be an extension of the student. As we teach computers to help students find their writing weaknesses, we put them in charge of their own language. It is probably most

important that the writing teacher know when to hold back comments and overlook errors. If we err in our judgment, it is better that it be on the side of withholding comment and missing an opportunity than offering an unwanted comment when the student is just beginning to take pride in his work. While we are waiting for more students to take advantage of the tutor's help, many of our students prefer to share their work with each other. In this way, they try out their work on a real audience of their own choosing. Most will choose their readers with an unfailing intuition for which student will offer no more criticism than wanted. The criticism may not always be very insightful, but it encourages the writer's self-scrutiny. As the writer reaches for a real audience, increasingly he writes with a real voice and provokes reactions which are genuine.

Our spell checker is fairly new. By next year we may be able to offer our students the help of a computer thesaurus and maybe an outliner. We would like to develop a peer tutoring program, but there is little time available in the teaching day for either students or teachers to do this. However our writing place has already begun to become a writing center. We sponsor word and writing

games; we have begun to publish selected student writing: we are struggling to coordinate computer hardware to permit the school newspaper's Macintosh to communicate with the writing center's Ile's so that the newspaper can be published from the writing center, We look forward to the day when communication hardware will link our center with information services and libraries throughout the state and even the country so that our writers will have instant access to much valuable information. Such hardware will also permit projects between students from different schools, thus greatly enriching the experiences of our students. Much more remains to be done. In the meantime, we must tread softly, nurture rather than criticize, and search out programs which release the magic of our computers.

Emery Roth II Shepaug High
School Washington, Ct

[Ed. note: Mr. Roth is particularly interested in comments and suggestions from readers. Please address your responses either to the Writing Lab Newsletter or to Mr. Roth, Shepaug High School, Washington, CT 46794.]

WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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