

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

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writing

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of
November, 1996

...FROM THE EDITOR...

Although no two tutorials are ever exactly the same, we do tend to find threads of similar themes running through our work. We detect patterns, generalize, and talk about models to the extent that we want to pass along to new tutors what we know—or think we know.

This month's newsletter, however, challenges us to re-examine familiar truths from new perspectives. For example, while we may talk monolithically about working with ESL students, Bouchra Moujtahid offers us insights into why we cannot think of all ESL students as generically alike. And in the midst of discussions of "outreach" that writing labs are so often engaged in, Jon Olson helps us see how *inreach* can be a form of reaching out. And Howard Tinberg and Greg Cupples find a new middle-ground to consider in the debate about whether tutors need to have discipline-specific knowledge when tutoring.

Like a good brainstorming tutorial, the essays in this month's newsletter should expand our thinking, add new avenues to explore, and suggest that no writing lab truism can ever be tucked into the "finished" column. Sounds like the rest of our work—never done!

• Muriel Harris, editor

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Influence of cultural and linguistic backgrounds on the writing of Arabic and Japanese students of English

From discussions within the Seattle University Writing Center and at writing center conferences, it has become clear to me that people involved with writing centers tend to view ESL students as a large, homogeneous "problem area," and do not recognize that the students from each national group share a set of writing difficulties which are closely related to the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of that particular group. Each group faces very different problems and tends to produce characteristic mistakes which result from confusion of the structures of their native language with those of English, and from writing to satisfy cultural expectations which are very different

from those of the United States. Language is an expression of culture, and the influence of either upon the writing of foreign students cannot be understood without considering the other as well.

Though it is unrealistic to expect writing center consultants to become expert in all of the languages and cultures represented on their campus, it is essential that they be aware of the importance of this influence in the writing of their cli-

ents. Knowledge of some basic mistake which members of a particular national group are likely to make can be invaluable to consultants, who can then point out its origin to the client, who is nearly always unaware of it. (While researching the problems of Arabic students, I was repeatedly skeptical, at first, of scholars' explanations, then startled, as I recognized that they were explaining difficulties which I had experienced and had never understood!)

Recognizing that a mistake in English is a perfectly good structure in one's own language can be extremely helpful in making the necessary adjustment. A broad understanding of some of the most common and characteristic problems likely to occur in the writing of those groups of foreign students frequently encountered in the Writing Center will greatly enhance the effectiveness of the consultants, and provide a welcome sense of understanding and accomplishment, where there is now only confusion and frustration.

For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to focus upon students from Japan and from Arabic nations, because these two cultures are widely different from each other and from that of the United States, because their languages are completely unrelated to each other or to English, and because both groups are well represented at Seattle U. Japanese and Arabic students experience very different problems with writing English, not only because their languages are so different, but also because of the way each culture regards verbal communication. Since deciding to base my study upon these two groups, I have discovered that many ESL scholars have found this a productive comparison; a surprising number of studies have been done focusing upon the Japanese and Arabs.

All people who work at helping Arabic and Japanese students learn how to write English have observed, often without reflecting much upon it, that Arabs tend toward exaggeration, emo-

tionalism, overstatement, and what is sometimes called "purple prose." Japanese, on the other hand, tend toward—well, toward the opposite of every one of those characteristics. The Japanese are more often restrained, undemonstrative, cautious, and understated. These tendencies are reflected, especially with the Japanese, in their behavior during Writing Center consultations. These differences between Arabs and Japanese are exactly what students of the two cultures would predict.

Probably the key word in understanding the Arabic approach to writing is "Rhetoricism." In the Arabic culture there is a strong emphasis upon effective expression. The implications of this are extremely important: there is greater emphasis upon the *form* of the expression than upon the *content* which is being expressed. Arabs pay far more attention to impressiveness than to logic and reasoning: "They are swayed more by words than by ideas, and more by ideas than by facts" (Patai 48). Therefore, Arabic patterns of speech and of writing are characterized by exaggeration and emphatic assertion.

There is also a great tendency toward elaborateness. The colloquial Arabic equivalent for the English "thank you," for example, is "Kathar khearak," which means "[May Allah] increase your well-being." An American might wish a sick friend a "speedy recovery," or tell him to "hurry up and get well," but an Arab would literally say, "May there be upon you nothing but health, if Allah wills." This sounds quite ordinary to Arabs, but very exaggerated to English speakers. American expressions in such circumstances would sound weak and insincere to an Arab.

Many examples could easily be added. Americans might say, "We missed you," but Arabs say, "Awhashtina": "You made us desolate." The root of this expression is the noun "Wahsh," which literally means wilderness or desert, and also melan-

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choly or mental agony (Patai 50). When Arabs say things like this in English, it sounds fine to them, but strikes Americans as extremely overstated, and therefore, ironically, as insincere. Furthermore, it is a general rule in Arabic that every phrase of courtesy must be returned by a more elaborate phrase. When two Americans meet in the morning, one says, "Good morning," and the other replies, "Good morning." Arabs would be offended by such simple repetition. The first Arab will phrase his good morning wishes as follows: "Naharkum said": "May your day be prosperous," to which the other Arab will respond, "Naharkum said wa moubarak," which means, "May your day be prosperous and blessed" (Patai 51).

To an English ear, Arabs tend to exaggerate in public or political pronouncements. For example, during the Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein declared that Iraq was preparing for "the mother of all wars," Americans thought he was silly. Though his army was being badly beaten, he boasted until the day he surrendered that the war was going wonderfully well for the Iraqis. Arabs understand that such exaggerated statements are not intended to report on the state of reality, but rather to represent what the Arabs intend or hope to do, what they believe they are capable of doing.

The strong desire that an event should take place, or that a situation should obtain, produces a verbal statement (corresponding to the dream) in which the desired event is represented as an accomplished fact. (Patai 52)

All Arabs understood Hussein perfectly well—Americans concluded he was insane.

The cultural tendency toward "exaggerated" expression is reflected in the structures of the Arabic language, which has various emphatic forms produced by the addition of suffixes denoting special stress. Arabic verbs also have special forms of conjugation

which intensify the activity expressed by the basic verb form. Further, sentences are frequently introduced by an emphatic particle, "Inna," which means, literally, "Behold!" "There is a man" becomes, in Arabic: "Behold, there is a man!" (Patai 52) Deprived of the resources to express such effects in English, an Arab tries to produce English equivalents.

Arabs also find it necessary to repeat themselves to a degree unacceptable to Americans. If an Arab wishes to impress upon somebody that he has definitely made up his mind about what he wants to do, he will state that fact several times, using a series of repetitions, often with increasing emphasis, and always with slight stylistic variation (Patai 53-54). Such rhetorical forms are required in Arabic, but redundant in English.

These grammatical and stylistic features of spoken and written Arabic create serious problems when it comes to communicating with Westerners, and the difficulty is made worse by the fact that Americans understand the *words* just fine, and therefore think they understand the *communication*, lacking the cultural context to interpret it.

Similarly, a simple assent from an Arab can be, for him, nothing more than a polite form of evasion, while the same word may mean for his English interlocutor a definite, positive commitment. . . . A simple "Yes" or "No" is, for the English speaker, a definitive statement. His Arabic interlocutor, however, conditioned as he is by the exaggeration and over assertion that are the rule in his own mother tongue, is simply incapable of understanding such brief and simple statements in the same sense. For him, "Yes" only means "Perhaps." . . . Only if the English speaker had said: "Yes, I am telling you definitely, yes; I assure you positively and emphatically, yes; my answer is irrevocably and permanently, yes!" would the Arab

have got the point that what the English speaker *really* meant was "Yes." (Patai 56-57)

Patai reinforces this point by telling of an English woman who complained about the persistence of an Arabic man who would not "take no for an answer." The Arab, however, insisted, in all sincerity, that he felt the woman was inviting him to make love to her, though he had shown little interest in her beyond polite expressions of admiration (57).

There are many specific grammatical difficulties which Arabs face in learning to write English, including the inability of the Arabic language to distinguish clearly between present and future tense, or between past and past perfect. This is of course reflected in their writing—English tenses confuse an Arab. Similarly, many ESL scholars have pointed out that the most common and pervasive grammatical problem which Arabic students of English have is their difficulty with English relative clauses. Unlike Japanese, which has no structure comparable to English relative clauses, Arabic does have such structures, and Arabic students therefore have no tendency to avoid them—but the structures are *formed* differently in Arabic, and that causes all the trouble. In "Arab Students' Problems with the English Relative Clause," Nayef N. Kharma distinguishes fourteen different types of errors which Arabs make in using these structures. He points out that Arabs have a great tendency (as I'm sure writing center consultants have noticed) to repeat the subject of a relative clause: "I can give you examples of large families which (they) are living a good life." Frequently, they repeat the object of a verb or preposition, and they tend to confuse "which" and "who(m)," and to write "Who his" for "Whose." I read in the paper of an Arabic client the other day, "Oedipus try to find out whose the murder of Laius." All fourteen of these mistaken structures listed by Kharma are simple translations from perfectly correct Ara-

bic.

When presented with this information, I found myself resisting the idea that such problems had ever troubled *me*. Upon reflection, however, and upon translating back and forth between English and Arabic (something I do not normally do), I found that it was indeed true. And just yesterday, I received an e-mail message from an old friend of mine, now studying in England, in which he said, “I am very busy with my school work. Even the letter I received from you I couldn’t read it until Friday.”

It is not necessary, of course, for writing center consultants to memorize fourteen different ways Arabs make mistakes in relative clauses, but it is invaluable to know that Arab students are likely to have troubles with these structures, and that such troubles result directly from their native language. The consultant can then draw the Arab client’s attention to the origin of the problem, rather than marveling, as often happens now, that anybody can be so dense as to have such difficulties. And it would be very encouraging to the struggling Arab if the consultant could point out that relative clauses are similar in English and Arabic, that his mistakes are quite understandable, and that the *meaning* of his sentences is *never* lost as a result of the kind of mistakes he is making. As Karyn Thompson-Panos and Maria Thomas-Ruzic point out in “The Least You Should Know About Arabic,” it is the responsibility of those attempting to help foreign students to write English “both to be familiar with the differences in organization between the students’ native language and English and to make the students aware of these differences so that they are better prepared to meet the expectations of their readers” (619).

Arabs, like Americans, use language to express themselves, and genuinely believe that such communication is

successful. Japanese, on the other hand, are not so confident. There is a deep distrust of language in the Japanese culture, stemming, perhaps, from the Zen Buddhist conviction that language imposes its own organization upon reality and prevents us from seeing what truly *is*. Japanese prefer to use body language, or intuitive rapport, or some other means of communication, because they feel such means are more sincere than language. If an emotion is put into words, if it *can* be put into words, it is somehow trivialized, insincere.

Perhaps once more reflecting the influence of Zen Buddhism, the Japanese culture does not value logic in the Western sense. The Japanese are very poor at logical argumentation, however good they may be at mathematics, and they are therefore very poor at the kinds of essays assigned in American universities. The Japanese value the flash insight—a single, simple statement of truth directly perceived, without the intermediary steps of syllogistic reasoning. As a result of this, a typical essay by a Japanese student contains a series of insights which, to an American, have no apparent connection and no apparent organization.

To a Japanese, what we call “top-down” writing seems very mechanical and artificial, almost like “painting by the numbers.” They can’t organize their ideas in the Western fashion because, as difficult as this is for Americans to understand, such organization is not a value in the Japanese culture. They see top-down writing as basically boring, and as they practice it, forcing their thoughts into the most mechanical and simplistic of outlines, it *is* boring. Japanese students want to present their ideas as intuitive insights. When such statements are connected as elements in a logical argument, they lose their force as moments of truth.

Like Arabs, Japanese have a tendency to say yes as a means of polite

evasion. “Yes” to a Japanese often means “Maybe”; “Maybe” means “Probably not.” “Will we be able to sign a contract with your company?” the American asks, and the Japanese replies, “Yes, it is entirely possible; we are taking the matter under serious consideration.” The American returns to New York thinking he has a “lock” on it, when in fact he has just been told that the deal is stone dead.

On the other hand, in another context, “Maybe” can mean, “Absolutely, positively.” “Have you seen Professor Yamamoto?” a Japanese student asks her classmate. “He was asking for you.” “No,” her friend replies. “Do you think I ought to go see him?” “Maybe,” says the first speaker, meaning, “You had better get up to his office in the next ten minutes or you are in deep trouble!”

Though “Yes” tends to mean “Maybe” for both Arabs and Japanese, the consequences of this ambiguity are radically different in the two cultures, in ways which greatly affect their respective writing styles. If an Arab really means yes, he will repeat and emphasize that fact in a variety of ways, as explained above. “So I’ll see you at two o’clock tomorrow?” “Yes.” Or rather, “Maybe”! If the first speaker really wants to make sure that the two o’clock meeting takes place, he will have to press the other person for assurances with repetition of the arrangement, removing any ambiguity.

The Japanese, however, are virtually *unable* to say “no,” and would find inconsistent pressing for exactness extremely offensive. In a Japanese context, the listener must simply accept the ambiguity and wait and see what happens. The smoothness of the social exchange is far more important than any problems created by failing to meet at two o’clock. If the meeting is truly important, then the inquirer might simply ask, “What time would you like to meet tomorrow?” “How about three

o'clock?" "That will be fine." And being Japanese, they will both arrive at 2:45. These characteristics and tendencies must be kept in mind when attempting to deal with Arabic repetition and overemphasis and with Japanese indirection, understatement, and ambiguity.

Japanese and Arabic speakers share another verbal characteristic that is very puzzling to Americans: they answer the *form* of a negative yes-no question, rather than its contextual intent. "Aren't you going to school today?" the American asks, and the Arab replies, "No." This means, as any Japanese would understand, that he *is* going to school: "No, I am not going." "Yes" would mean "Yes, I am not going."

Like Arabic, Japanese does not distinguish between what Americans call present tense and future tense, or between past and past perfect, relying upon context to clarify the precise meaning, which of course, it does not always do, either in Japanese or in the English which a Japanese student writes.

The Japanese have developed one of the most complex and elaborate systems of politeness in the history of the world, and their language contains a corresponding system of politeness levels, by means of which a speaker can address a superior with appropriate forms of honor and elevation, or speak down to an inferior with forms that establish their relative social standing. Japanese businessmen, upon meeting for the first time, immediately exchange business cards in order to determine which is superior to the other. Only then will they *literally* know how to talk to one another. In any circumstance in which the relative position of another person is unknown, a Japanese will be very uncomfortable, and will normally become silent. A Japanese speaking in English is stripped of these forms, and when speaking with a

teacher, for example, feels that he is being extremely rude every time he opens his mouth, because he does not have any appropriate "honorifics" with which to address such an honorable person. To a lesser degree, this affects the ability of a Japanese to speak or write in English to nearly anyone but an exact equal, and this further accounts for the difficulty many Japanese students have in discussing their work with writing center consultants, who are, in this relationship, in a position superior to the client. The consultant must be aware of the causes of such silence, and of the deep need of the Japanese student to avoid "losing face."

More precisely, the Japanese must *protect* face—his own and the person with whom he is speaking. Attempts to drive the student into discussion by implying laziness, or disinterest, or incompetence will result in painful embarrassment. The student knows he is incompetent, and is in great pain over it already. Throwing it into his "face" is entirely counter-productive. Means must be found which will avoid such shame and give the client confidence that face will *not* be lost, without ever openly mentioning the difficulty. When this trust is established, a Japanese will become quite relaxed and communicative. For instance, the consultant could divert the discussion temporarily away from the painful point of embarrassment, which might be, for example, an inability to compose sentences more than ten words long, into some element of the paper where the student is comfortable, such as details of the narrative. When the student is reassured and more at ease, the consultant could return to the difficulty indirectly, perhaps by introducing the idea of combining the simplistic sentences of the narrative.

The further I go in my research, the more clearly I realize that those problems in writing English which are based in the Japanese culture are reinforced and perpetuated by the social

structures of modern Japan, especially the educational system. The Japanese do a very poor job of teaching English, and after six to ten years of study, few Japanese can speak more than a few sentences. The teaching of English is based almost entirely upon grammar and translation. This is reinforced by the university entrance exams, which require exactly those skills and no others. The teachers teach to the test, which is the way they were taught. Writing center consultants must be aware that the sometimes extreme limitations of their Japanese clients result largely from the educational system which has failed them in this area, however successful it may be in teaching them engineering. A little knowledge of this system will also help consultants to know where their clients are strong and where they are weak. No Japanese can profit from lectures on grammar. Nearly any Japanese student can pass exams in English grammar which her consultant would fail, and can analyze any sentence put before her, because she is trained to do that. She just can't *make* sentences. And she certainly can't make *paragraphs*. The help she needs is exercise in applying her technical knowledge of English to the production of English communication.

In fact, work has been done on precisely this need. Brant M. Kresovich, for example, in "Sentence Combining Activities for Japanese University Students," has devised a series of seven types of exercises directed to the specific problems of Japanese students in constructing sentences and in combining them into paragraphs and essays according to Western concepts of logical development.

Japanese writing difficulties which result from cultural interference are also treated in such articles as "Topic Confusion in English-Asian Discourse," by Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong-Scollon. The authors discuss the tendency, consistent with the linguistic

and cultural characteristics of Japanese I have pointed out above, to delay the introduction of the topic of an essay, developing it inductively and indirectly. This is quite different from the need felt in the West to introduce the topic early and directly.

In summary, my research has strongly confirmed my original hypothesis that the difficulties ESL students face in learning English, spoken or written, are greatly influenced by their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Even the most basic understanding of the types of problems likely to appear in the work of students from any particular national group would be extremely useful to writing center consultants in their efforts to help such students improve their skills at writing English.

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(This paper was originally presented as the keynote address at the 1995 Conference of the Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association.)

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Call for stories

We've all seen the power of stories about significant tutoring experiences. From the anecdotes we share in our staff meetings and tutor-training classes to the Tutor's Column we read in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, we learn from these stories.

We would like to create a central World Wide Web location where such stories can be compiled and where writers can publish them—a website on the NWCA homepage. From this site, you will be able to read, download, or add first-person narratives about the issues central to our work: proofreading, plagiarism, tutor-student-faculty relationships, EFL issues, training, administration, and more.

To get this website started, we need your stories. Consider the challenges of meeting students' needs while being non-directive; or helping students who returned to college after 15 years working in the non-academic world; or hearing about how a writing consultation saved a student's semester. Whether you are a writing center tutor or a director, we invite you to share those significant moments that you think would be helpful to a reader, and we encourage writing center directors to urge their tutors to submit stories to this database.

Initially, you'll need to send the story to us, but, once the website is set up, you'll be able to add your story yourself if you wish. We will not edit your sto-

ries; we'll simply add them to the database, making them available for reading and downloading to anyone with World Wide Web access. Also, we can post your stories to the website with or without your name attached. Once we receive your story, we will contact you to find out how you want us to identify you.

For more information or to submit your stories, please contact:

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WRIT-C, an electronic discussion group, was created to facilitate communication among people who work in writing centers, especially tutors/consultants/coaches.

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WRIT-C Electronic Discussion Group

To subscribe, send a message to: listserv@tc.umn.edu. Leave the subject line blank, and in the message window type: subscribe writ-c. Note that messages posted to the list should be sent to writ-c@tc.umn.edu Dave Healy is the list manager (healy001@maroon.tc.umn.edu).

Outreach through *inreach*: Writing centers and extended education

Knowledge is not extended from those who consider that they know to those who consider that they do not know. Knowledge is built up in the relations between human beings and the world, relations of transformation . . . —Paulo Freire

When Oregon State University reassessed its mission and mandated every unit on campus to engage in extended education last year, many of us in the College of Liberal Arts thought of agricultural extension agents: those researchers who leave their lab and drive a truck out into the countryside to diagnose and cure disorders—to examine clusters of white flies on back door lumber or to inspect cracked and blistered apples, describing and prescribing while chipping at apple cankers and fingering fly cases with knowledgeable hands. As the Coordinator of our university's Writing Center, I tried to think just how we could put the Center on wheels and take it into the community in search of writers needing assistance in response to specific problems. I was stymied until Paulo Freire's ideas about agricultural and educational extension—especially those found in *Education for Critical Consciousness*—began to guide my thinking.

Freire's ideas about extension through dialogic collaboration might help us fulfill the university's mission of extension, and we would not necessarily need to create a mobile writing center to do it. Although we had not reached *out* to hand the community our expertise, we had been inviting those outsiders *into* our Center so we could receive their expertise. As opposed to outreach, this was *inreach*. In the process of *inreach*, the members of the community and the Writing Center had both been transformed. We had begun to achieve extension as Freire defines

it: "the act of extension involves [a] relationship between human beings . . ." (94). In Freire's extension relationship, knowledge and abilities are "not *extended* from those who consider that they know to those who consider that they do not know" (109); instead, knowledge and abilities are communicated in a collaborative dialogue between teacher and learner that is "from the inside out," not "from the top down" (48). Thereby, the world of writing instruction is transformed, a transformation beginning with both the teacher and the learner within the extension relationship.

Collaborative learning has long been the goal of the Writing Center in OSU's Center for Writing and Learning, a goal we share with many other writing centers around the world. Rather than teach our staff to be writing tutors who *transmit* writing knowledge and skills, we've tried to train them to be writing assistants who *transact* knowledge and skills. Writing assistants and writers talk about drafts of writing in ways that help both writers learn. Freire's educational philosophy has helped us think about why and how we want to establish such two-way *communication* between writers, instead of having one-way *communiqués* from a tutor to a learner. When the university challenged us to find ways of reaching out to the community through educational extension, we considered the challenge from Freire's perspective on extension and empowerment.

Freire's observations of agricultural extension in Chile and literacy instruction in Brazil show the limitations of extension practices that merely hand over tools, techniques, and knowledge, and then withdraw the hands that were extended. Greater success seems to come when hands touch, stay together, and work together. Freire sums up his ideas on agrarian reform through cultural transformation by noting that an effective extension agent cannot be a "removed and distant technocrat" but must instead be an "educator who is involved, who goes into the process of transformation *with* the [farmers]" (135). The result of this kind of extension is, to use Urie Bronfenbrenner's terms, a developmental dyad in which the developmental change of one member of the dyad depends on the reciprocal developmental change in the other member of the dyad (65). We had unknowingly begun a developmental, mutually transforming, collaborative kind of extension *inreach* in 1990 when we began letting non-students join the staff as volunteers. As a result, the Center changed, and so did those community volunteers.

This *inreach* is nothing new; in fact, many institutions—community colleges especially—have long recognized the richness of community connection. For us, it meant we didn't immediately have to wheel the Writing Center out into the community (though such a mobile venture might happen in the future). Right away, we could develop our savvy at bringing the community *into* the Writing Center to

achieve mutual growth through extension.

The first member of the non-university community to participate in our *inreach* program was Jaspal Singh. As far as we can remember, she was the first non-student to work as a writing assistant. While living in India, she had earned a B.S. degree from Delhi University in a combination of chemistry, zoology, and botany, and had earned her M.A. degree from Agra University in English literature. Before coming to Corvallis, she had owned and operated a boutique in North Carolina, doing marketing and also organizing and participating in fashion shows for the mall where her shop was located. She dreamed of going back to school for another graduate degree, but she had doubts, given that her only work experiences in the U.S. had been retail. However, the Writing Center ultimately provided her a transition into the university. At Oregon's Annual Conference on Composition and Rhetoric, Jaspal described what it meant to her to volunteer in the CWL's Writing Center.

The Writing Center enabled Jaspal to become familiar with academic writing, especially with writing in an American university, and it helped develop her own writing skills through working with others. Those others, her friends and colleagues, proved invaluable in supporting her as she tackled a daunting university application process that seemed particularly disrespectful of students with foreign degrees. After volunteering for a year as a writing assistant and applying a second time to our graduate program, she gained admission. During a time of intense intellectual development, she quickly completed a Master of Arts in the interdisciplinary areas of English literature, English composition, and women's studies. Much of that time she worked in the Center, where she attended to writers with dignified, re-

spectful concentration. She now teaches at the University of Oregon as a graduate teaching fellow in the English department while earning a Ph.D. in comparative literatures.

Since Jaspal became a writing assistant in 1990, there has generally been at least one member of the community on a staff of 20 to 35 members during any given term. For the last two years, Sam Zelman has volunteered as a writing assistant, working with student and community writers at all levels. During his fifty-year career in news writing and television production, Sam was an executive and news bureau chief with CBS, as well as a producer for the news weekly *60 Minutes*. He was a founder of Cable News Network (CNN) and was vice-president and executive producer for CNN when he retired. The students on the Writing Center staff have appreciated him so much that, without administrative prompting, they nominated Sam for OSU's Order of Orange award, an award given to a member of the community in recognition of outstanding service and contributions to the student body of OSU.

Sam was on the same conference panel as Jaspal, and he also spoke about how the Writing Center had contributed to his educational development. He gave humorous examples of the new words and phrases he learns from students: "Sweet, dude." "Cool." "Everything's groovy." The writers with whom he works give him fresh perspectives on writing and keep him vitally engaged with language in ways that augment his own writing: "Serving as a writing assistant has been a great experience in concentration. Focusing the mind is essential to good writing," he wrote on an end-of-term self assessment. The self assessment invites members of the staff to describe what they learned that term in the Writing Center as well as how their writing improved. Sam always writes something like "I've learned to pay more attention

to overall organization, to identify places in the paper where more information is needed. This is more difficult, clearly, than pointing out missteps in spelling, grammar and punctuation." But in addition to helping him stay sharp as a writer, working in the Writing Center gives Sam an identity in his retirement. As he put it, "If someone at a cocktail party asks you what you do and you say, 'I'm retired,' that often ends the conversation. But if you say, 'I work with students on honing their skills as writers,' you have something to talk about."

It is probably obvious how individuals such as Jaspal and Sam change and benefit the university: they bring maturity, leadership, skill, professionalism, and real-world perspective into what is sometimes perceived as an artificial, scholarly environment. Their experience from the work-a-day world that students hope to enter adds a useful dimension to the Center. By explaining his own experience with writing in the professional world, for instance, Sam tries to inspire students to improve their writing skills. He found that writers of "concise, clear memos, for example, gave their careers regular booster shots and often developed a reputation among their superiors that led to career advancements." Jaspal would urge students to pay attention to their *ethos*, for she understood that respect and dignity were equally important in the workplace and in writing.

The community volunteers have not just "fit in"; they have thoroughly enjoyed the relaxed, sometimes boisterous college atmosphere. Their breadth of experience has often given them a perspective which some students think is more expert than that of college-age writing assistants. Therefore, these volunteers are kept busy, often requested first, especially given the large number of undergraduate students on our campus who are older-than-average (25.1 years of age for a senior). On the other

hand, many younger students prefer the writing assistants who are closer to their own age. The volunteers from the community diversified our staff in terms of interests and experiences. Yet, they have not created a hierarchy of age, skill, or experience, perhaps because they have comprised such a small percentage of a fairly large staff (they have self-selected, and there has been no recruitment beyond word of mouth). As they have touched the papers and the lives of student writers and coworkers, there have been no problems—only benefits, mutual benefits for both the Writing Center and the members of the community. More

importantly, however, inreach extension has benefited the university's students. Community volunteers like Sam and Jaspal impress our student writers, one of whom writes: "Instead of relaxing in a Barcolounger, drinking tea and listening to polkas," they selflessly give their time and share their knowledge—"with no benefits other than knowing [they are] helping others."

Extended education is traditionally defined as outreach. As Freire's work illustrates, educational outreach has often extended information and skills one way, from top down. But, if we view extension as a two-way transaction

from inside out, *inreach* can become an important component of outreach. Ultimately, distinctions between reaching in and reaching out might blur in a Freirean model of extended education. Sharing time, receiving knowledge, helping others within relations of transformation: whether inreaching or outreaching, those seem to be the best ways to fulfill our university's primary mission of educating students.

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East Central Writing Centers

Call for Proposals
April 18-19, 1997
Pittsburgh, PA

"Front and Center: Reimagining Our Work."

Keynote speakers: Patricia Stock and John Trimbur

Contact: Margaret Marshall, Writing Center, University of Pittsburgh, 501 Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh, PA 15260 Phone: (412) 624-4285; fax: (412) 624-6639; e-mail: marshall+@pitt.edu Deadline for proposals: January 15.

Penn State Conference on Rhetoric & Composition

Call for Papers
July 6-9, 1997
University Park, PA
"Rhetorical Bodies: Toward a Material Rhetoric"

For information about proposal format and general conference information, contact Sharon Crowley, Dept. of English, The Pennsylvania State University, 117 Burrowes Building, University Park, PA 16802-6200. Phone: 814-863-3066; fax: 814-863-7285; e-mail: ALA2@PSU.EDU or AXG5@PSU.EDU; WWW address: <http://www.cde.psu.edu/rhet&comp/> Send proposals postmarked or faxed (but not by e-mail) by December 2, 1996.

TUTORS' COLUMN

Reforming the grammar cop

As a new tutor, I started out focusing on those things that could be measured. Grammar, punctuation, and mechanics were easy in the student's paper because there are definite rules, to judge on right-and-wrong, standards to go by. After all, wasn't that the way I had learned to write?

All through school I had gotten plenty of red marks on papers, shouting at me where the mistakes lay—the quote marks coming before the period instead of after, the misspelled words, the misplaced commas. I can't remember receiving much praise for my writing, but I remember plenty of red marks (“gotchas”) that kept me focusing only on everything negative. Those red markings dogged me, screaming where I had failed. Obviously, if I didn't know how to use commas, then I must be a terrible writer.

Years later, as a new tutor I was sensitive enough to the feelings of my tutees that I always tried to praise their efforts as much as I made suggestions. My heart was in the right place. but I often heard myself praising a draft using ambiguous, unhelpful terms such as “I really liked it! It's good,” or “I can see that you've put a lot of effort into your paper.” Regardless of how trite (to me) my comments started to sound, I was still pleased that I could think of something to praise in even the most hopeless drafts. But something was missing. Where was the thrill of helping another individual become a better writer when all I was doing was being a grammar cop? I wondered if the students actually learned from my tutoring sessions. I knew in my own case I learned more when I did the work myself, looking up what-

ever I needed to know. But the time constraints helped justify my methods too. After all, I only had twenty minutes to work with each paper.

My supervisor continually stressed that our job as tutors was not to edit or proofread, and I agreed with her, but at the same time I didn't know how to be helpful without focusing on those lower-order concerns such as usage and spelling. I justified my own methods because it was quicker and easier for me to do it that way. I knew I was taking ownership away from the student and investing it in myself as the authority, the one with all the answers and a lot of students really believed they were getting what they came for when I told them exactly what was “wrong” and how to “fix” it.

Then I read Muriel Harris' book, *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*, in which the author elaborates on the directed approach versus the nondirected approach to tutoring. In the directed approach, the tutor assumes that the tutee has come for concrete help and advice, and offers specific remedies. In the nondirected approach, the tutor assumes “that most people can help themselves if they are freed from emotional obstacles such as fear of criticism and fear of failure” (70). The tutor elicits responses from clients through questions about their writing that cause the tutees themselves to think of ways to improve it. In this way the tutees retain responsibility for their own writing—and learning.

I finally understood how I could stop being a grammar cop and focus on the global, holistic aspects of the writing

process. I was especially struck by Harris' quoting of Stephen North defining the role of tutors: “Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (32). I had been tutoring papers: I hadn't been trying to create better writers.

My first session of the next day, I slipped into the old familiar pattern. I focused on mechanics, made lots of marks on the paper, and vaguely mentioned a few things about “being more specific.” But I wasn't following my own advice. The only thing I was being specific about was the tutee's mistakes, making them seem by the amount of time I spent pointing them out as if they were of the utmost importance. I even supplied words and phrases for the writer to use. About higher order concerns such as thesis, tone, organization, and development, I continued to be vague. I wanted to apply what I had read, but I felt tied by habit.

Finally I broke free. When the next tutee came in for a session, I purposely laid my pencil down out of reach of my quivering hand, while I made sure that the tutee had one for herself. As I read her paper aloud, I asked questions. The best questions, I learned were the six W's: “Who, what, when, where, why, and how?”

At first the tutee acted flustered and offended that I didn't seem to understand what she meant in her writing. Her eyes locked into mine as she tried to explain. Often she verbalized what she meant more clearly than she had written it. Finally I pointed out that she could use my questions as clues about where she needed to make her writing

more concise or specific. After she realized she could use my questions as tools to help herself, she no longer felt threatened, and she visibly relaxed. As the session came to a close, I directed her to a writer's usage guide where she could look up some grammar rules, but I didn't simply give her the answers. I wanted her paper to remain hers.

Donald Murray, in *The Craft of Revision*, warns that "Most writing instruction. . . is error oriented. Everyone looks to find out what is wrong. But effective writing is built from what is *right*, not wrong" (55). In using the nondirected approach, I was able to emphasize that writing is a process, not a product to be judged as right or wrong. By asking questions, I was able to stimulate the tutee to think, and by thinking, to stimulate independent learning. I also removed myself from the role of authority, which promoted more interaction. With nondirected responses, the tutee didn't just sit and listen to my advice; I asked questions, and then I listened to the tutee's answers.

At times, the nondirected approach may not be as desirable as the directed approach. The nondirected approach may not work as well if the tutee is an ESL or an international student lacking in verbalization skills. Or the frustration level can go up if the tutee is physically or mentally challenged, has an unseen learning disorder, or even if, as sometimes happens, the tutee is just having a bad day. But tutors can always start by being nondirective, and if they suspect frustration levels are rising, they can easily change and be more directive.

Muriel Harris writes: "The primary goal of [the tutor]. . . is to make the student a skilled, knowledgeable practitioner. . . The [tutor's] goal. . . is to work him/herself out of a job, that is, to make the student independent" (28). Nondirected tutoring helps the student grow toward independence, while helping the tutor become independent of the role of grammar cop.

Melinda Nutt
Peer Tutor

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

Nov. 2: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in Portland, OR

Contact: Karen Vaught-Alexander, University of Portland Writing Center, 5000 N. Willamette Blvd., Portland, OR 97203-5798. Phone: 503-283-7461; e-mail: karenva@uofport.edu

Feb. 28: Northern California Writing Centers Association, in Hayward, CA

Contact: Kimberly Pratt, Division of Language Arts, Chabot College, 25555 Hesperian Blvd., Hayward, CA 94545. Phone: 510-786-6950.

March 1: New England Writing Centers Association, in Providence, RI

Contact: Meg Carroll, Writing Center, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI 02908; e-mail: mcarroll@grog.ric.edu

April 18-19: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Pittsburgh, PA

Contact: Margaret Marshall, Dept. of English, Cathedral of Learning, U. of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260; phone: 412-624-6555; e-mail: marshall+@pitt.edu

April 18-20: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Augusta, GA

Contact: Karin Sisk, Augusta College, Writing Center, Dept. of Languages, Literature, and Communications, Augusta, Georgia 30904-2200. Fax: 706-737-1773; phone: 706-737-1402 or 737-1500; e-mail: ksisk@ac.edu

Sept. 17-20: National Writing Centers Association, in Park City, UT

Contact: Penny C. Bird, English Dept., Brigham Young U., Box 26280, Provo, UT 84602-6280. Fax: 801-378-4720; phone: 801-378-5471; e-mail: penny_bird@byu.edu

WCenter Electronic Discussion Group

WCenter is an electronic forum for writing center specialists hosted by Texas Tech University. The forum was started in 1991 by the list manager, Lady Falls Brown (ykflb@ttacs1.ttu.edu). To subscribe, please do the following:

send to : listproc@listserv.ttu.edu
no subject line
message: subscribe wcenter <your name>

Knowin' nothin' about history: The challenge of tutoring in a multi-disciplinary writing lab

Posing the questions

Tutors in a college-wide writing lab inevitably face these difficult questions: Does assisting students with their writing require knowledge, to some degree, of the course and discipline that generated the writing? Or, as has been suggested, does having familiarity with a subject or discipline hamper tutors (Hubbuck 27)? If tutors do benefit from familiarity with disciplinary knowledge, what is the nature of that knowledge? And how do tutors acquire it? Despite the kind of separation that exists between those who tutor and those who teach, we can all agree that effective tutors want and need to know the context of particular works that come into the writing lab: the instructors' prompt, comments, and any formal guidelines set up for the assignment. Many of us may indeed want the poem or chapter that prompts a particular piece of writing, in order better to serve students in assessing their work. But we may find little agreement on the notions that 1) the writing that comes into writing labs differs in profound ways according to discipline or subject area and 2) that our work as tutors hinges on our recognizing and exploiting some of those "context-specific ways of knowing" (Odell 87).

By no means, are we going to make the case that tutors in a multi-disciplinary writing lab need to become experts in the college's various disciplines, nor will we deny the usefulness of generalizable "primary traits" as a basis for evaluating writing across the disciplines. Rather, we will suggest that helping students with improving their disciplinary writing is a complicated business, and that we all benefit—tutors and clients—when we rely on a

combination of evaluative instruments: generalizable traits of writing across the disciplines and elements specific to writing in a particular discipline or disciplines.

What kind of knowledge transfers?

The problem that we see facing writing centers has as its root this central, philosophical question: Is knowledge transferable? By that we mean, can knowledge of one discipline prepare us to understand the conventions and ways of knowing of another? And if such transfer can occur, are surface features alone transferable? Or do more complex activities transfer? According to work done in learning theory, no global, generalizable skill can be applied to all domains—each domain must be built from the bottom up (Larkin). Moreover, "productions" (proceduralized, usable knowledge) are constructed from domain-specific knowledge (Anderson). What does such research suggest about writing in the disciplines? To learn what is good writing within a discipline seems to require knowledge of that discipline; to learn what is good writing across the disciplines may have to begin within each of those disciplines.

Acknowledging the distinctive demands of disciplinary writing

For some time now, scholars in a variety of disciplines have been claiming that knowledge is socially constructed, that it is made by a community of learners who have come to a consensus as to what is known and how we come to know it (Bruffee; Fish; Kuhn). Each community is then defined by a particular set of beliefs or paradigms with which the members of that community

perceive and order the world. The writing that is produced by the community is, in Charles Bazerman's words, "highly contextualized," that is, it must reflect the way the community thinks and believes (Bazerman 22). For example, Watson and Crick, in their famous paper on the structure of DNA, as Bazerman shows, reflect their membership in a community not only by referring to a body of research known by members of the specialized field of genetics but, more profoundly, by "subordinat[ing] themselves to scientific knowledge" (Bazerman 30). In other words, they position themselves as observers only and work hard at removing any emphasis on their role in what they have found. For that community of scientists, the person has little place next to the phenomena observed. The situation might very well be different in the writing of an ethnographer such as Renato Rosaldo, whose account of the grieving ritual of a Philippino tribe might well include his own personal grief at the death of his wife. The observer indeed becomes a participant (Rosaldo 19).

The usefulness of generalizable "primary traits" to evaluate writing across the disciplines

In speaking this way about discipline-specific ways of knowing, we do not mean to render insignificant those generalizable traits that college writing labs across the country have devised to evaluate the writing that comes their way. In fact, such traits can be extremely useful in capturing those qualities that might comprise acceptable "academic" writing at the college. After all, there ought to be some agreement as to what that kind of writing entails, certain demands that all faculty

at an institution can claim they regard as important in the writing that their students do. In our own institution, a state-supported two-year college, the Writing Lab staff, comprised of faculty representing all divisions of the college, has worked hard to produce a list of “primary traits,” that is, criteria that we consider to be important to all competent writing at our college:

Perspective: Good writing has perspective, a way of seeing. Perspective is expressed through *point of view, voice, and thesis.*

Audience: Good writing is appropriate to the reader, the purpose, and the occasion.

Evidence: Good writing makes use of detail to persuade, to move, or to inform the reader.

Logic: Good writing is coherent from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, beginning to end.

Correctness: Good writing displays competence in grammar and punctuation, and accuracy in spelling. The use of another’s words or ideas must be cited.

These traits have served us well in our Writing Lab. As “primary traits,” these criteria, however, are not meant to be the last words about what constitutes competent writing in the disciplines. We recognize—and state as much in a preface to the list—that all “writing is contextual.” By that we mean that writing depends on the disciplinary context and situation in which the writing is done. Each discipline does have a distinct set of assumptions about the way knowledge is made and expressed. A student who writes an essay for an English literature course may be ruled by conventions and assumptions quite unlike those that guide the student writing for a history course.

A test case: Writing in history

What kinds of assumptions or conventions might set one discipline apart

from another? In what circumstances would the “primary traits” not be enough in order to evaluate a piece of writing? As a test case, we thought we would look closely at one discipline’s way of knowing and way of writing—reflected in an actual assignment drawn from the classroom and a student response to the assignment. Both were the subject of some discussion in a summer workshop on writing in the disciplines. The assignment and the writing it elicited seemed to complicate our discussion of tutoring writing in the disciplines, for reasons that we believe will become clear.

The assignment came from a course in early modern Europe. Students were to read two perspectives on the causes of the French Revolution, one view being that of Edmund Burke. They were to write an essay comparing one view with the other. The task included the following: “Explain any concepts each author is using, the assumptions that each is making in their historical arguments, implications of their thinking.” The teacher remarks that Burke’s “reflections” are shaped in part by class identification (Burke, while middle class, “identified” with the great families). Moreover, Burke, students are told, presents an “argument” which they are to examine. Implicit here is a connection between an historical event and the writer’s construction of the event. The teacher seems to confirm this view by referring to the “assumptions” in each writer’s argument. The questions that tutors and students might raise are: In what sense is historical writing an “argument” in the first place? How are such arguments made? The socially constructed nature of such writing is made clear when students are given two perspectives of a single historical event.

Certainly the teacher’s expectations are in part formal, and would coincide with the primary traits that our lab has agreed upon for “good writing” in the disciplines: for example, the need for an introduction, which would make clear the student’s “purpose” and per-

spective; or the request that students provide “concrete evidence” to support their assertions. The teacher even reminds students of an audience, who the students can assume “knows nothing about either author”—an audience very much like the tutor who might read the essay.

But the question that we have is whether, given the nature of the assignment, the tutor should indeed know something. We would suggest that what tutors should know has less to do with the reading of Burke and the other historian, Lefebvre, than with the reading of this assignment and, by extension, the reading of this essay. More precisely it has plenty to do with the business of writing and reading history.

What do we mean by “writing and reading history”? In an ethnographic study of writing in the disciplines, a college history professor spells out “what historians actually do”:

College history courses should introduce students to the world of what historians actually do. This usually involves introducing them for the first time to the concept of conflicting opinions in print, which is often difficult for them to grasp, and teaching them to recognize and adopt a critical approach to the opinions of others. This is combined with assigning them to develop their own opinions and to argue them against opposing points of view. (Quoted in Walvoord and McCarthy 99)

The need for students to “develop their own opinions” is of course an expectation stated in our “primary traits” and is transferable to all kinds of writing. But it becomes something very different against this kind of backdrop, that is, against the notion that historical writing may present “conflicting opinions.” To render one’s own point of view knowing that there may be several reasonable views of an historical event is daunting to say the least. History then becomes an on-going nego-

tiation, an on-going sifting of opinion.

We believe that the assignment given earlier assumes a similar view of history and requires that students demonstrate a facility with the kind of writing that “historians actually do” with this one important exception. Our teacher does not seem to be asking her students to adopt an independent, critical approach. She is content to have her students recognize legitimately conflicting points of view. Let’s see how one student handles the challenge.

Reading the student response

In her opening paragraph, the student writes that the paper will look at two radically different views of the French Revolution, using class as a basis for analysis: “This paper will reflect upon how Burke saw the French Revolution as a problem for the privilege [sic] class, and how Lefebvre saw it as a problem for the lower class.” As her assignment requests, she promises to offer two conflicting accounts of the Revolution.

What becomes clear from the second paragraph on, however, is that the student has decided to render a negative judgment on Burke’s version of events while leaving Lefebvre’s view pretty much unscathed: Burke’s interests become narrowly defined as the nobles’ while Lefebvre “did not just tell about the noble class, but rather he showed what the noble class did to the lower class.” In other words, the student has decided early on, before presenting the views of the two men fully and deeply, to favor one over the other.

An attempt to critique Burke in the sections following show very little grasp of Burke’s position, essentially reducing that position to “the nobility were treated badly.” There is very little attempt to understand Burke’s larger motives (his view that “I do not like to see anything destroyed”) or his acknowledgment of the nobility’s failures. Or to see how Burke’s views were influenced by his own circumstances.

For our purposes what is most striking is how the student moves irrevocably toward a reductive view of history, that there is but one truth and it is Lefebvre’s. The essay concludes this way: “Lefebvre let people see the truth for once, he spoke for the lower class, showing how they survived through the French Revolution with the help of the upper class.”

We could make the case, as many of us who read this essay in our Lab did, that the student simply loses control of her paper (and perhaps never had control of her reading). We could simply say that the structure by which to compare and contrast these two different histories evaporates. In short, the paper lacks any real coherence. Of course, we would be right in saying so.

But our view as well is that the student has committed a fundamental mistake in her reading of the assignment and, we believe, of history generally. Her teacher asks her to recognize the legitimacy and logic of each man’s viewpoint, and to spend a good deal of time drawing out the assumptions behind each argument. But there is very little evidence that the student understands what true historical argument really means. It is not simply a matter of declaring a winner and a loser. Each offers an interpretation of events, an interpretation that must be studied for its assumptions and implications.

Reflections and conclusions

Perhaps, in a certain sense, all we are saying is that tutors in a multi-disciplinary writing lab need to be cognizant of the context that generates the work students bring to it. But knowing that context must, it seems to us, mean knowing something of the ways of knowing and writing specific to the discipline in which the piece is written. Generalized traits are, as we have seen, quite useful as tools for evaluating writing in the disciplines. However, much can be lost in translation or transference. If we wish students to respond appropriately to the work asked of them, we must as tutors do the work

required of us. We are not suggesting that tutors become experts in historical or sociological discourse. What we are suggesting is that to be able to read and evaluate disciplinary writing effectively, we must learn something of the specific conventions that govern such writing.

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WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Ethical standards and writing centers

What implications, then, do the ethical frameworks discussed last month hold for writing centers? How might these standards apply to writing centers or tutors or conferences, and how do they inform the construction of a writing center ethics? We can certainly see how the ethical standards referred to in these theories might explain—or at least provide one explanation for—certain aspects of writing center practice. In accordance with the standard of intuition, for example, tutors in a writing center setting will certainly be guided by their *intuitive understandings* of writers' problems and motivated by their *consciences* in conferences, however we might choose to construct either of those terms. Their intuitional impulses, whether the result of a biological/spiritual birthright or a socially-constructed behavioral schema, cannot help but shape their activities when working with students. Tutors, for the most part, will tutor in the spirit of benevolence, out of a sincere desire to help students to improve their writing, and they will generally conduct themselves in a kind, civil, and sympathetic manner as well.

Yet we can also see that the standard of "law" pervades much of what goes on in the writing center and in tutorials. Writing center theory and research—derived, in principle, from the empirical foundations of "natural law"—has a tremendous impact on pedagogy and policy. Writing scholarship informs practice and helps tutors to understand what works and what doesn't in tutorials. Interactions between tutors and students are studied in a variety of ways using a variety of research strategies, and reasoned conclu-

sions about those interactions are drawn from the resulting data. These conclusions, in turn, are used to shape tutor training and to suggest particular teaching strategies for particular situations. If a given tutorial practice has been shown by research to be ineffective, then it would be unethical to continue using that practice. In the same fashion, we can see that a different kind of law—composed of the rules, regulations, traditions, and mandates attached to a specific institution—will also affect writing center ethics. Some policies such as hiring regulations and reporting requirements may be imposed upon writing centers and tutors by agencies outside the center itself. These policies certainly have the force of law, and they can impact a writing center's ethics in significant ways.

"Happiness" or "pleasure" touches both the affective and the cognitive ethics of a writing center. We want students to feel good about their writing, and much of what we do in conferences is point out student strengths and indicate what we like about what they've written. By doing so, we help the student feel good, and this makes us feel good as well. But we also recognize that the value of this "good feeling" can extend beyond the immediate pleasure of the moment. It has useful, practical value as well. By helping students to believe in themselves and their writing abilities, we can help them to overcome their fear, their tentativeness, and their writing blocks. These seem to be reasonable goals for a writing center, and most people would probably agree that

achieving these goals would qualify as an ethical "good." On a purely utilitarian level as well, much of writing center practice and virtually all of its day-to-day operating policies (length of conferences, frequency of visits, etc.) are guided by the spirit of pragmatism and a controlling desire to provide "the greatest service to the greatest number" (within the restrictions of its operating budget, of course). Ethical decisions about the optimum conference time/student ratio will ultimately be based in assessments of relative utility and how to garner the greatest amount of total "happiness."

"Evolution" and "perfection" are, in some ways, at the heart of a writing center's instructional mission. Writing centers exist, in part, to intervene in and support student writing processes. We work with students and texts as they develop over time. Tutors want to teach students how to become better writers, and one of the ethical criteria we can use to measure what we do is how effective our practices are in helping students to realize this end. Are the students evolving as writers—becoming better and more capable as a result of our tutorial conferences? And are texts moving toward "perfection"? Admittedly, it makes no sense to talk about a text ever becoming literally "perfect," nor should the achievement of that unrealistic goal be considered the only true measure of success in a conference. Yet, tutors (and students) cannot help but construct an abstracted image of the "ideal paper" or the "ideal writer" in their minds, for whatever paper they happen to be working on in

whatever genre, and they often use this as a goal to work toward in conferences and guide the operation of their writing processes.

Perceptions of “value,” as I indicated earlier, can also influence a writing center’s ethics, though perhaps in a less obvious or significant way than some of the other standards. I think that most writing center personnel, for example, have a sense that writing centers are innately ethical, that a writing center’s value is embodied in the very activities that go on there, independent of any externally-imposed standard or criterion or set of consequences. If we accept G.E. Moore’s example of “the pleasure of human intercourse” as an instance of innate goodness, and if we tie it to other pleasing “organic wholes” such as the emergent discourse in a student text, the teaching and learning relationship enacted in a tutorial conference, and the reciprocal

cognitive benefits of working collaboratively to solve a perplexing textual problem, then the standard of value can also help us to see and understand the ethical worth of what we do.

Each of the ethical theories described here—or, more accurately, each of the ethical standards which underlie the ethical theories described here—can be brought to bear on writing centers, then, and used to explore (or justify) some of the practices that take place within them. Yet, this rather facile application of epistemological perspectives seems insufficient to a full elaboration or understanding of a writing center ethics. For one thing, each of these theories taken individually says little about either the particular ethical problems that face writing centers or the multiple contexts and conflicting ethical agendas that writing centers (and tutors) often have to face. In ide-

alized circumstances, it might be possible to say that the standard of natural law should reign supreme in writing center ethics, that rational thought, logical deduction, and empirical research should determine how to act ethically in tutorial conferences. But tutorial conferences are rarely so easily constructed or described that empirical approaches alone can point to adequate solutions. When a student like the one described in the opening example comes into the writing center—a student with his own individual set of language difficulties, emotional responses, and cultural and educational contexts—existing research is likely to offer only limited help, and logical deduction will find itself hard pressed to account for the innumerable social and personal factors that make this student, and this conference, unique.

So how are we to resolve these complex and often conflicting ethical theories in writing center work? And how are we to incorporate the particular details of specific contexts in our contingent assessments of ethical tutoring? That will be the topic of next month’s column.

THE WRITING LAB
NEWSLETTER

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