

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 25, Number 4

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

December, 2000

...FROM THE EDITOR...

For another issue in this 25th year of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, we have a "Looking Backward and Forward" essay by someone we all value as having contributed greatly (and continuing to do so): Jeanne Simpson (see page 1). If you have some reflections on our history and how it's shaped you and is molding (y)our future, please do send in your own "Looking Backward and Forward" column.

In addition, you'll find the usual mix of other good reading in the rest of this issue: articles, reviews, a tutors' column, conference announcements, and job listings.

After a great deal of pushing and shoving and getting all the columns and pages and spaces to come out even, I learned an important bit of news but didn't have an inch of blank space in which to insert it. So, late breaking news (at the time this issue was put together): the superb website of the National Writing Centers Association, constructed and run by Bruce Pegg, has changed web addresses. Bruce took the website with him when he moved from Colgate University to Syracuse. The new address for the NWCA site is < <http://nwca.syr.edu/>>.

• Muriel Harris, editor

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Looking backward and forward:

"What I Learned at College"

My adventures with writing centers began in 1978, when I entered graduate school at Illinois State and had an assistantship in the writing center there. Later, I established and directed the writing center at Eastern Illinois for nine years. From my administrative experiences, I offer advice that I hope will give other writing directors insight and provide them ways not just to survive but to accomplish their goals. As a result of these experiences, I have developed what Sara Kimball calls Simpson's Laws. Well, Sara speaks of the first one only, but over the years a few others have evolved:

1. Keep the budget lines short.
2. Control your own budget.
3. Keep reporting lines simple.
4. Write your own evaluation process before somebody else does.
5. Use the principle of productive embarrassment.
6. Eat out often with your colleagues.

From the beginning, it has been through writing center people talking

with one another that we have discovered common needs, common goals, common elements in the academy that all needed to address. All of the players have done their part. My experiences exemplify the value of networking, beginning with being taught and mentored by Jan Neuleib at Illinois State, Mary Croft at Wisconsin-Stevens Point, and of course, Mickey Harris, at Purdue. Early meetings at NCTE and CCCC with research on writing centers and experiences shared

proved invaluable. We had regional networks and organizations, but we began to see that something of national scope was needed, leading to the development of the National Writing Centers Association and the position statement of 1985 on working conditions.

At the Denver NCTE conference in 1982, I met and worked with Jeanette Harris, Nancy McCracken, Marcia Silver, and Joyce Kinkead, as NWCA was born. We started putting together a constitution for NWCA and identified the position statement as another of our first goals. Assigned this task as a member of the first NWCA board, I interviewed colleagues in Denver and more at the Midwest Writing Centers Conference the next spring and eventually constructed the position statement. That task was rewarding, for I had the chance to discover how many of “us” there were.

The position statement helped identify consistent problems both for me and for others in writing centers. I realized that I would have to quit applying depression-era, make-do thrift and to begin to fight for control of my space and identity as a writing center director. I became aware of the almighty ruler in the academy, The Budget. If I had understood budget principles as well as I do now, I would have made more astute choices about how to spend money on the writing center. I would have recognized that stealing furniture and “making do” helped me to get the center started, but that it also set a pattern of expectations that the center would always do fine on a starvation budget. (Yes, I stole furniture; my first tutor was Ray Wallace, who demonstrated Indiana Jones panache in helping me snatch a huge bookcase out of a hallway without asking and install it in the writing center.) Worse, it never occurred to me to fight for control of my own budget, leaving me in the position of supplicant all the time. Now, I would add some things to the Position Statement, based on the bud-

get laws I learned. Writing Center directors need to have control of their own budgets. And, the shorter the budget pipeline, the better, for the existence of a budget always includes somebody wanting to dip into it or to appropriate the whole thing. Every stop on the pipeline is an opportunity to bleed off dollars. Budgets create both freedom and enemies. Machiavelli Greenspan Simpson says: Be aware of the enemies and *get the budget*—directly from the provost if possible.

On the other hand, I learned another law that helped me survive my naivete about budgets. In June 1983, I was informed that I had 48 hours to figure out how to spend \$1200 for the center. (Later, I learned that this phenomenon is called Closing Out the Fiscal Year, and it happens all the time as good budget managers realize that lapsing money unspent means a smaller budget next time.) So I bought a TRS-80 (remember calling them “trash-80’s”?) computer with a whopping 4K of memory and absolutely no software. I didn’t know squat about computers yet. Still, once the thing sat on a desk in the Writing Center with a university inventory tag on it, something had to happen. And it did. I got more money for a printer, for software, for a memory upgrade, for more computers, faster, bigger, and so on. Going in and ‘fessing up that I had a \$1200 gadget that I couldn’t use was embarrassing, but the strategy worked. Simpson’s Principle of Productive Embarrassment: presenting a *fait accompli* may require some blushing and apologizing, but it sometimes gets just the result desired.

In 1990, I moved to central administration where I had the opportunity to view the writing center from yet another perspective. I learned that faculty love to hate administrators, but there is a certain ironic freedom in knowing that from the start—occasionally I was able to deliver a pleasant surprise. I began to understand the plight of the ad-

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Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is 10-15 double-spaced typed pages, 3-5 pages for reviews, and 4 pages for the Tutors’ Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. If possible, please send as attached files or as cut-and-paste in an e-mail to mjturley@purdue.edu. Otherwise, send a 3 and 1/2 in. disk with the file, along with the paper copy. Please enclose a self-addressed envelope with return postage not pasted to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 45 days prior to the month of issue (e.g. August 15 for October issue).

administrator who must juggle a myriad of budgetary requests, providing me a better understanding as to what writing center directors must do to define the center and keep it funded.

Along with controlling the budget, one must know well the reporting lines. If they look like a plate of linguini, pick through them until a clear sense of reporting lines develops. If you are in a position to simplify or change them, all the better. I didn't learn this lesson in time to apply it to the writing center I established. The result is that it remains mired in a tangle that includes a department chair, a couple of different deans, and various committees, all trying to steer the center, not always in a single direction. Worse, subsequent directors and I

faced a needlessly complex evaluation process for promotion and tenure. I realized later that I (and any writing center director establishing the position) could have written the process for myself, because no one else seemed to understand what directing the center involved or how it should be evaluated. The principle that emerged is to design the process of evaluation yourself, before anyone else does. Do it for yourself before someone does it to you.

Last and most fun, I learned that surviving in the academy continuously requires good networking. Writing center people are the dadgummedest networkers I've ever seen—world-class, gold medal, championship networkers. We keep in close touch, never mind the miles. We mentor each

other, make sure we attend to younger generations of writing center people, point out job opportunities, support promotion and tenure efforts, and share information like mad. Perhaps my favorite memory is arriving at Nathan's in Georgetown, and putting names from WCenter to faces at our first 4C's breakfast, an occasion of noise and camaraderie that far exceeded the little get-together the hotel concierge and I initially had arranged. It's a wonderful tradition. Simpson's Law of Comestibles: if you want a great network, make sure you and your colleagues eat together regularly. *Bon appetit!*

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Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

Feb. 16-18, 2001: Southeastern Writing Centers

Association, in Auburn, AL

Contact: Isabelle Thompson, Auburn University (thompis@groupwise1.duc.auburn.edu) and Glenda Conway, University of Montevallo (conwayg@montevallo.edu)

March 3, 2001: Northern California Writing Centers

Association, in Rohnert Park, CA

Contact: Scott L. Miller and Rose Gubele at the Sonoma State University Writing Center, 1801 E. Cotati Ave., Rohnert Park, CA 94928. Ph: 707-664-4401; e-mail: writing.center@sonoma.edu. Conference website: <<http://www.sonoma.edu/programs/writingcenter/ncwca2001>>

March 23-24, 2001: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Granville, OH

Contact: Cindy Johanek, English Dept, Denison University, Granville, OH 43023. Ph: 740-587-5793; e-mail johanek@denison.edu. Conference website: <<http://www.denison.edu/ecwca2001>>

March 29-31, 2001: South Central Writing Centers

Association, in Lafayette, LA

Contact: James McDonald, Department of English, P. O. Drawer 44691, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, LA 70504-4691. Phone: (337) 482-6907; e-mail: jcm5337@louisiana.edu

March 31, 2001: Northeast Writing Centers Association, in Worcester, MA

Contact: Anne Ellen Geller, Writing Center/ Writing Program, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610, (508) 793-7469, angeller@clarku.edu. Conference website: <<http://www2.clarku.edu/resources/writingcenter/NEWCA/>>

June 18-20, 2001: European Writing Center Association, in Groningen, The Netherlands

Contact: e-mail: eataw.conference@let.rug.nl; fax: ++31.503636855. Conference website: <<http://www.hum.ku.dk/formidling/eataw/>>

We've got friends in textual places: The writing center and the campus library

An ongoing conversation among those of us working in writing centers concerns the ways in which the writing center can serve as an interdisciplinary adjunct to other departments and services on college campuses. In particular, collaborations are occurring between writing centers and libraries—collaborations that acknowledge the shared focus of these academic resources. Writing center staff as well as librarians help students with research. However, this link is contentious as librarians and writing center directors draw deep disciplinary lines between the work they do. Regardless of our real or imagined differences, both the writing center and the library understand one shared truth: students fear the library and the process of research almost as much—if not more—than they do the process of writing. Therefore, it only makes sense that further collaboration should occur.

Our attempt to continue the conversation between writing center and library staff follows from the previous “commonsense” framework. What is *less* clear, or “commonsensical,” however, is how to make the goals of the writing center and those of the library work in concert. Moreover, as we contend, there are important, and as of yet, overlooked theoretical and practical connections between the library and the writing center. Our goal, then, is to articulate the theoretical links between the work we do and to advocate for future collaborative projects that make these links function in real and dynamic terms. Such projects would help to forge an important interdisciplinary alliance.

What happened in our neck of the woods

The urgency to create a shared project between our writing center and campus library initially grew from a

very practical and woefully untheoretical source. Numbers. Being only a year old, the Writing Center at Bryant College wanted to demonstrate its unquestionable value. As we know, one of the most common measures of a center's success is the number of students receiving assistance. Logically, if students visit the writing center, they perceive it as a valuable resource. The library, on the other hand, is the heart and soul of a college campus. Regardless of how many students use its services, the library will never fear dissolution. Sure, it may have to cut its hours or lose some of its journal subscriptions, but like Emerson's *Over-Soul*, it is, and always will be, there.

But our initiative was not entirely self-serving. One of the most common complaints students have upon visiting the Center is that they do not know how to go about doing research for a paper. One first-year student explained, “I'm afraid of going into the library looking like an idiot because I don't know where things are or how to use any of the references or machines in that place.” Students who have their research completed either do not know what to do with it or do not know how to repeat the process of research.

As a result, some faculty take their students to the library to help them with their research, often after these students have tried it on their own with little or no success. Once there, reference librarians help them get started with their research; they emphasize such topics as how to find useful sources, how to locate materials in the library, and how to reference borrowed material. This same instruction occurs within the Writing Center as well. Student tutors field questions about library research, describing such things as how to perform a successful keyword search in the ProQuest database. Staff

in both places assist students with various stages of the research process. The point here—and one that was patently obvious to us—is that the library, faculty, and the writing center duplicate some of the same work, the same instruction. We had found a way in.

Until last semester, the link between the writing center and the library at Bryant College was relatively weak. That is, until we had what we thought was a great idea. The idea was to design a research workshop for students enrolled in English 121, a writing-intensive course that most first-year Bryant students take. The long-range plan was to create a workshop that would not only help students with research for specific papers in the humanities, but also to show them what to do with the research once they had found it. Ultimately, we thought students would benefit from a series of hands-on writing and research workshops held in the library and facilitated by both Writing Center and library staff. However, to avoid tripping on our shoelaces, we had to begin with one small step: A single workshop designed around a research paper in English 121.

What happened to the great idea

Two meetings between Writing Center and library staff yielded what we thought was a general consensus on how the workshop should proceed. However, the outline we received days later from a reference librarian testified to an apparent miscommunication. The outline read:

1. Announce the Reference and Circulation Staff
2. Explain the function and materials of the main level of the library
3. Brief tour
4. Return to the main level
5. Show students reference books

- useful for their research
6. Demonstrate the use of the book catalogue
 7. Demonstrate the use of the ProQuest network
 8. Briefly explain to students other resources available (Magill 1998)

While this outline covered the “what” of the tour, it still—and contrary to our decisions in the meetings—left out the hands-on work that would allow students to do their own research. Also, the “finding information” stage of research was not being presented as part of a process, in relation to other stages such as refining a focus or developing an argument. Clearly, we hadn’t communicated our intentions as well as we thought. Perhaps we were also guilty of not hearing the librarians’ intentions during this second meeting. We began to wonder whether or not the Writing Center would have a distinct role in the workshop. What were we doing wrong?

This story does have a somewhat happy ending. Another meeting prompted reorganization of the project. Once it was clear that students would be coming to the workshop with ideas and topics in mind, we were better able to identify what information would be most useful for them. The final product was primarily a workshop format. Students sat at computers, guided by reference librarians and Writing Center staff, found appropriate sources, and were taken to the area of the library where these sources could be found. Every student left the workshop with at least one source in hand. In practice, the workshop had been a partial success. Students performed a library search relevant to their own coursework, though they learned little about how to use what they found. In theory, we were able to identify some major differences in the ways in which the library and the Center view the process of and connections between research and writing. These points of

departure and discrepancy are where we need to begin in rearticulating the work that we can do—together.

Defining the work we do

As we in the Writing Center discussed our retrospective insights on how it all went, it became clear that part of the problem was that we really do not know what librarians do. As we tried to theorize the differences between the way “we” look at writing and research and the way “they” look at it, we concluded that we know very little about the work “they” do. We improvised based on our experiences of the marginally productive “traditional” tour model and the complaints of our students who wandered through the information forest—often without a map or a compass. Our inability to define clearly what it is the library does and how they do it began to sound like many of the questions asked about the role and function of the writing center: “What do they do over there, anyway? How do we know they aren’t doing the work for the students?”

The vague responses librarians and writing center directors often have for these questions do not indicate a weakness. Rather, this similarity indicates one point of convergence. That is, both the library and the writing center (and we could easily extend this claim to the teaching of writing in general), in disciplinary terms, do not have a static object of study. We deal primarily in the realm of action. So, in response to the question “What is it that you do?” we answer with the context-specific answer: “It depends on the situation.” There are no set rules for writing a paper because these rules change with the writing situation. Similarly, a student researching an economics paper will not generally use the same library resources as she would for an English paper. Thus, the process of writing, as with the process of research, is highly contingent upon the assignment and the discipline. The

strength of building a coalition between the library and the Writing Center is in our ability to work across disciplines.

Librarians, too, see a theoretical connection between the work of these two campus resources. Jean Sheridan, a librarian at the University of Rhode Island, explains, “Librarians have a lot to tell students and writing instructors about process. For years they have been teaching that research is a process composed of many different steps that are often repeated. And they are the first to say that it is not easy, this process, that it is characterized as much by dead ends as by successes, and that it is messy and frustrating” (71). Though Sheridan is referring to the relationship between the library and writing-across-the-curriculum programs, her understanding of writing instruction and how it relates to the work of librarians is revealing for composition specialists.

It is interesting, for example, to see prewriting through a library specialist’s eyes: “In the initial stages, topic selection can be assisted through a perusal of subject headings in indexes and CD-ROM data bases, the *Library of Congress Subject Heading List*, the indexes and tables of contents of books, and the use of general and subject encyclopedias and other reference sources” (73). If we take these suggestions as representative of librarians’ advice for students having trouble out of the blocks, we can see some clear differences in the way librarians and writing center staff treat the writing process. For example, while a writing center tutor might suggest a student should scan the index of a database, the tutor would just as likely present the student with alternative ways of starting out. These alternatives would include methods that *utilize* writing itself to arrive at a focus (or number of possibilities), entering the conversation without hearing what others have to say—at least, not yet.

Regardless of the alternatives presented, what is important is that a variety of methods, processes, or paths are presented. These differences cause us to wonder what happens to students' writing processes if they begin their research project in the library as opposed to the writing center. Would Sheridan's suggestion cause students to overemphasize existing "knowledge," or would reviewing these materials help students see themselves as part of a community of learners? It seemed to us that librarians focused too much on locating or finding information without integrating this activity into students' particular writing processes.

Our first attempt to bridge the work we do led us to some problematic conclusions. Based on their sense of what students need to know and how they go about teaching that information, the librarians we worked with seemed to find a more general approach the most beneficial. We believe students who are initiated into the research process via a general tour remain passive as the librarian tells them where to go to find "materials." Like spectators at the Great Exhibit, students tour the library; they never interact with it. Though these librarians are genuinely concerned with the students they work with, this approach leads to inactive, disengaged students. Students would be better served if the staff of the writing center and library shared their particular understanding of the research process.

Writing center and library staff need to be willing not only to talk, but to listen to each other's principles and methods. Marilyn Lutzker, a librarian, writes that "Librarians need to talk to writing instructors. To put it bluntly, there are quite a few things librarians should be prepared to tell them" (Sheridan 105). However, our own misconceptions about the library indicate that Lutzker's suggestion to talk "to" instead of *with* fails to establish a productive collaboration. Instead of

talking *to* members of the library about what we do, the staff of both the library and the Writing Center need to identify and exploit the important interdisciplinary links we share. What needs to be addressed is the nebulous disciplinary space—the realm of research—that both academic resources share.

Both the library and the writing center occupy service positions in the university. Their role is fairly limited to assisting students with work they need to do for the courses in which they are enrolled. As a result, both focus on practical ways of solving problems. For the writing center, this means helping students brainstorm for ideas, develop a topic, narrow down a focus, and organize thoughts. For librarians, this means acquainting students with the resources available to them and providing a general method with which to approach a research problem. But, as we all know, the process of research is highly contingent upon the assignment. Thus, no one approach will suit every student or every writing situation. Moreover, as professional writers and researchers, we know that the process of writing, as with the process of research, is very recursive. Few of us have been lucky enough to make a visit to the library a one-stop shopping spree. We need to return to follow up on leads, check references, or start the whole process over when we have not found what we need. The same applies to writing. That's why we often encourage students to return to the writing center at different points in their writing processes.

Thus, in theoretical terms, our shared emphasis on the student's role as an active participant in the process, the similarities between writing and researching as recursive processes and the disciplinary position of providing an academic resource to students all make for important building-blocks toward an alliance. This alliance can be developed only through library and writing center staff listening to each

other's philosophy and method, and by not making assumptions about what happens when a student visits either place. For us, this means asking our librarian colleagues "What do you see as the relationship between writing and research?" instead of "This is what we want to do. What do you want to do?" Students, as well as library and writing center staff, would benefit from the clarification of the relationship between these two resources. At our institution, this work will involve a re-examination of our collaborative workshop and a more thoughtful blending of our philosophies. In this way, we will acknowledge our shared responsibility to help students become better writers and researchers.

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OOPS. . .

In the October issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, in the review of *Taking Flight with OWLs*, there is an error on page 10 in the newsletter. The author of "How Many Techno-provocateurs Does It Take to Create Interversity?" should have been indicated as Eric Crump, not Eric Hobson. We regret that this error wasn't caught in time and thank Eric Hobson for noticing it.

TUTORS' COLUMN

Endless revision: A tutor's self-evaluation

During an interview, Ernest Hemingway expressed his belief in the importance of revision: "I wrote the ending to *A Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, 39 times before I was satisfied." The interviewer asked what had "stumped" him. Hemingway replied, "Getting the words right."

This sentiment of Hemingway's not only describes the endless revision a writing tutor experiences in trying to refine tutoring techniques but also depicts the struggle to find the right words to express writing and grammatical concepts to students. I have been a writing tutor now for eight months, and I discovered I am continually refining my tutoring skills. Every tutoring session is different, and every personality is different. So how do I keep on top of the constantly changing atmosphere of tutoring sessions? Well, as the year comes to a close, I want to re-evaluate my tutoring skills by examining my habits as a tutor and, from this interrogation, determine what qualities classify a tutor as good.

My friends think I have it easy with this job as a tutor. In many cases I do. How many people can say they love coming to work and they took the job for reasons transcending monetary need. Yet, in many cases, my task can be quite cumbersome. Students come to the writing center with a paper, not even a long one in most cases, and in twenty minutes I am expected to discover its weaknesses, uncover its hidden beauty, and then help its creator improve. Sure, it sounds easy; I'm an English major, right? I have been trained to track comma splices, unclear thesis statements, disorganized paragraphs, and "bad flow." Well, unfortunately, this militant training does not

always save me in the midst of the crucible. Sometimes, this training does not prepare me for the artillery that comes in the form of a paper that really does not fit any recognizable or conventional format.

But, yet, these moments are perhaps the moments I decide whether or not I am a good tutor. Do I look at the paper and ask the student are you serious about this organization, or do I take an honest look trying to make the student understand she has the right idea in mind, but now it is time to concentrate on formulating a thesis to set up the organization? In most cases, my formal training tells me to do the latter which I always do, of course. I have found that pointing out anything good about a paper, no matter how insignificant, really helps encourage a student who most likely is frustrated and irritated by the task. I think finding something positive about a paper is a wonderful tool to help not only make the student feel comfortable, but help the student understand I am not here to tear apart her paper—I am a friend, not an enemy. This task of a tutor helps dissolve any reservations a student may bring into the tutoring session.

Margaret Bartelt, a tutor from Central Michigan University, believes "Most of our self doubt [as tutors] is grounded in our commitment to our students and our desire to provide them with the best possible tutoring experience" (8). I can relate to this intimidating situation: my first day at the writing center. The first student I helped was from an English 110 class. I remember I acted bold and self-assured; I was going to help him fix his problem. With my expertise, I could help this student get an A. My mind ran

with ideas of how I, Lisa Higa, could transform this paper into a jewel. The student in front of me was just a medium to compose this jewel. I forgot my responsibility as a tutor not to just critique a paper but more importantly to teach a student how to improve a paper. As a tutor, I cannot feel responsible for a student's grade. I am responsible for helping a student understand the writing process, but I do not have to carry the burden of worrying about the grade. Ultimately, the student determines the grade of a paper, not me. Putting aside this fear of responsibility helps me to be open and honest about tutoring. When a student begins to understand topic sentences and comma splices, I am doing my job as a tutor.

Bartelt concludes that we can proclaim our greatness as tutors when "students can comfortably discuss their papers with us, when they come to the writing center ready to work, when they value our responses to their writing, and when they relax and occasionally smile" (8). I agree with Bartelt, but I believe the element that not only complements, but completes Bartelt's assertions centers on the idea of understanding the individual needs of a student. Once I went to a writing tutor. She told me she did not interpret a Robert Frost poem in the same way I had, and basically, I was not worthy of her graduate student opinion. From this experience, I learned that how I value a student's idea determines my effectiveness as a tutor. This graduate student did not understand my needs as a student; I wanted an honest opinion, not an insult. Even if she had said "nice introduction," I would have felt better, but my self-esteem as a writer was crushed. When I look at a student's pa-

per, I do not give generic advice like "Fix the topic sentences and come back tomorrow." Instead, I try to help the student form examples she can look to when trying to revise at home later. This way, the student feels important and learns simultaneously.

Lastly, as a tutor, I believe my own physiological reactions to a paper affect the tutoring session. Even the slightest movement of an eyebrow the wrong way can set a student off and the whole session is destroyed. In the same tutoring session with my Frost paper, the tutor's physical response further crushed my ego. She acted irritable and impatient by rolling her eyes

and tapping her fingers on the desk; she did not want to spend another moment looking at this blatant insult to Robert Frost. When I am tutoring, I try to be patient and sympathetic. Simply smiling at the student helps deflate any resentment or anger a student may initially bring to a session. Patience is perhaps the hardest virtue to maintain in the writing center. Tutoring writing can be hard and frustrating, but I know when I start to act frustrated, I discredit my capabilities as an effective tutor. A student can sense my feelings and leaves a session even more frustrated than when she first arrived. Patience can make the difference to students who do not have any left themselves.

So, am I a good tutor? On the whole, I think I am. Through my mistakes and experiences, I have refined my amateur techniques of the past, and I have learned to read not only a student's paper but the physical expressions of a student as well. Yet, as Hemingway implies, the road to perfection is never complete; the process is infinite. It could take me thirty-nine months to get the words right.

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Writing Lab Newsletter 19.6
(1995): 8.

SOUTH CENTRAL WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Call for Proposals
March 29-31, 2001
Lafayette, Louisiana
*"Writing Center Gumbo: The Mix of Student, Tutor,
and Director Roles and Identities"*
Keynote Speaker: Jon Olson, Penn State University

Please submit one-page proposals for twenty-minute individual presentations or for ninety-minute panel presentations, roundtable discussions, or workshops, with your name, address, affiliation, and email address, to James McDonald, Conference Director, Department of English, P. O. Drawer 44691, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, LA 70504-4691. For questions, contact James McDonald, phone: (337) 482-6907; e-mail: jcm5337@louisiana.edu. Please indicate whether you would be interested in chairing a session. Deadline for Proposals: POSTMARKED BY JANUARY 12, 2001. Laissez les bon temps rouler!

Kellogg Institute and Conference

The Kellogg Institute for the training and certification of developmental educators will hold its 22nd Kellogg Institute, June 23-July 20, 2001, at Appalachian State University, Boone, NC. The Kellogg Institute will also hold its Third National Conference on Research in Developmental Education, October 24-28, 2001, to be held at the Omni Charlotte Hotel in Charlotte, NC. For information on both the Institute and Conference, write or call the Coordinator, Kellogg Institute, ASU Box 32098, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608-2098; phone: 828-262-3057; website: www.ncde.appstate.edu.

Writing Center Director University of Minnesota—Twin Cities

The College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities seeks a Director of the CLA Student Writing Center, scheduled to begin on 8/15/2001. The Director oversees all administrative aspects of the center, and conducts instructor training, student instruction, and writing consultancy. For complete job description, refer to <http://www2.cla.umn.edu/support/SWCdir.htm> or call 612-624-9839.

Send current resume, a letter explaining how background, education, qualifications, and experience relate to the needs of the position, along with three letters of reference to:

Student Writing Center, Director Search
College of Liberal Arts
212 Johnson Hall
101 Pleasant Street S.E.
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Applications will be reviewed starting Dec. 1, 2000, and will continue until the position is filled.

Book Review

The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher: Inquiry in Action and Reflection. Ed. Shirley K. Rose and Irwin Weiser. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, Heinemann, 1999. \$24

Reviewed by Mary A. Wislocki (New York University, NY)

"Reconstituting the Local"

"All politics is local."

-Tip O'Neill, *Speaker of the House of Representatives, 1977-1986*

If there is a theme to *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher*, it is that WPAs—including Writing Center Directors—are—and need to be—in the business of local research. This is the rationale: local research reflects and responds to local pressures in order to justify, sustain and develop local writing programs. Or, to put it more baldly, as Anson and Brown do in their case study of a WPA and her colleagues: "If they don't look both cooperative as citizens and demonstratively successful as a service organization, their writing program could be in danger" (145). Shirley K. Rose and Irwin Weiser, the editors of this volume, want to make a virtue out of this necessity: they want to reconstitute the political value of local research and to argue that what WPAs do counts as scholarship in the larger academic community.

The deeply political nature of our local research—and of most academic research, I suppose—reminds me of Tip O'Neill and his well-known aphorism. O'Neill achieved national stature during the Watergate years and he knew about politics. Take care of the people in your own backyard first is the folksy advice from his political handbook titled—not surprisingly—*All Politics is Local*. If you don't, you'll be out of a job. But O'Neill adds that taking care of the local will "allow" the politically astute to address national issues. While he acknowledges that local issues are only sometimes related to larger issues, I believe that for our lo-

cal research to be taken seriously as intellectual work, we need to distinguish between local and *local*.

Local research, like its political counterpart, may be of limited value or interest to people living outside a particular academic backyard. But *local* research begins to identify what is substantial in the particular; it is generative, a kind of "grassroots" research that speaks to other academic communities. I believe that it is *local* research that will give WPAs credibility in academia: it will put us on the map. However, this volume does not make such distinctions, but takes a more inclusive stance in beginning to articulate the value of local research. This is not surprising, given the complexity of this volume's project, the newness of research in our field and, especially, the provisional status of our profession.

Much of *The WPA as Researcher* reads like O'Neill's handbook. Or, to use a different analogy, these articles are the journal equivalent of the WCenter listserv: savvy colleagues talking over virtual backyard fences about the process and politics of doing local research. These articles are not as much about local research as they are *talk* about local research. There is value in this kind of communication, and as a writing center director with only a few years of experience, I appreciate the frank advice and warnings. Wanda Martin describes the difficult evolution of a long term project still underway in "Outcomes Assessment Research as a Teaching Tool." Muriel Harris underscores her assertion that many theories are at play in writing

centers in a comprehensive recital of research possibilities in "Diverse Research Methodologies at Work for Diverse Audiences."

Three other articles that argue for researching and archiving our administrative histories are particularly eye-opening. Shirley K. Rose, Ruth M. Mirtz, and Barbara L'Eplattenier each point out that creating a local history is a foundational academic move in defining who we are and how we have developed. Together these histories create a collective memory and reframe administrative data collection into a field that can be researched and theorized. Furthermore, L'Eplattenier says, "To create a history. . . grants one the authority and the precedent to shape not only the state of the present but also the state of the future" (137).

Several essays work to understand and elevate local administrative events through theory. Tim Peeples applies postmodern mapping to Wendy Bishop's written account of her conflict as a WPA with other administrators; Louis Wetherbee Phelps uses the occasion of her Writing Program's tenth anniversary keynote speech to continue to reflect on collaborative theory and the particular dynamics that created this program.

This volume also contains articles that I consider *local* research: they recount projects that help me rethink my practice and assumptions as a teacher and as an administrator. For instance, Sarah Liggett's article, "After the Practicum," suggests the rich conversation *local* research maintains with other locales, texts, and theories as she

assesses the reflective practice of GTAs. “Reflective Essays, Curriculum, and the Scholarship of Administration” by Kathleen Yancey and Meg Morgan provides an insightful reading of student texts that are part of a portfolio exemption program. While our administrative responsibilities are not at all alike, their research helps me to understand the assumptions and rhetorical development of my own student writers. And finally, Chris Anson and Robert Brown, Jr. use a case study format in “Subject to Interpretation” to provide a penetrating analysis about

the ways “successful WPAs must critically read their institutions as complex educational cultures with powerful habits of governance, disciplinarity, and interpretation” (143).

What this collection achieves as a whole is to begin a necessary discussion about what constitutes local research for WPAs. The benefits will be many: generating new knowledge and improving our programs are the first to come to mind. But I would like to believe that—individually and collectively—our local research in all its va-

riety will also articulate a rationale for writing programs that so convinces our sponsoring institutions that the necessity for our presence will finally “go without saying.” We believe that writing programs—and writing centers—are as central to higher education as the English department, but we must learn to do the research that will make our argument compelling to others.

Work Cited

O’Neill, Tip and Gary Hymel. *All Politics is Local and Other Rules of the Game*. New York: Times Books, 1994.

Reviewed by Lynnell Edwards (Concordia University, Portland OR)

What do WPAs really want? A discussion on WPA-L last March variously titled, “Thinkin’ about quittin’,” “Doin more than thinkin’ about quittin’,” and then finally, just “The failure strand” suggests that besieged WPAs want respect. We want respect for the validity and the scholarly substance of the local research we do. We want understanding for the rough and muddy administrative waters we transgress. We want resources to do the job we need to do: help students become more effective writers and university citizens. *The WPA as Researcher: Inquiry in Action and Reflection* confirms these themes and offers a representative sample of best practices in writing program administration. It also hints at, through interesting discussions of historical method, what disciplinary identity might look like. But it does not do the work necessary to establish what WPAs also want: a paradigm for theoretically sound local practice.

The local research shared in Part One, “Writing Program Administrators’ Inquiry in Action,” suggests that WPAs want validation for the local, highly contextualized research they do. Many WPAs will no doubt recognize versions of their own local research in outcomes assessment (Betty Bamberg, Wanda Martin), placement (Kathleen Blake Yancey and Meg Morgan), or

teacher training (Sarah Ligget), and will gain insight about how to best revise or expand their own practice. In the opening essay “Diverse Research Methodologies at Work for Diverse Audiences,” Muriel Harris justifies these methods of local research, particularly for writing centers, when she states, “Such locally produced knowledge also can contribute to the inquiry of other writing program administrators within the institution” (3).

And as the discussions progress, the claims for championing local research begin to sound like a mantra. Weiser concludes: “Such local research enables writing program administrators to fulfill their responsibilities to students, staff, and colleagues. . . . Such work must be recognized, valued, and rewarded by the institutions that use and are transformed by it” (102). Kathleen Blake Yancey and Meg Morgan open by stating, “As WPAs, then, not only do we seek to understand the particulars of our own local contexts, but also we seek in them generalizable issues pertinent to the discipline at large” (81). Mark Schaub bases his argument on the presumption that “each writing program is unique” (53). And Betty Bamberg affirms, “Although research conducted at other institutions and for other purposes can be useful, generalizing results to a different setting is not always valid. Moreover, ‘lo-

cal’ studies are almost always more convincing to the faculty committees” (37).

Collectively these essays suggest that there is an emerging theory of WPA work that transcends the local context, even if the defining feature of that theory is that WPA research unfolds as an inextricably local thesis. They also suggest that the local context is a unique cultural site that manifests what Geertz has called *local* knowledge. But the essays do not do the rich narrative work that characterizes ethnographic engagement. They do not offer examples of what Geertz has called “thick description,” or the dialogic unfolding of layer after layer of life in detail. These essays suggest there is authority in the power of the local story, locally told, but do not themselves engage narrative in ways that would accomplish the theory-building work of a discipline.

The speculative arguments in Part Two, “Writing Program Administrators’ Inquiry in Reflection,” come closer to telling this story, and begin to offer provocative visions of how the work of the WPA might come to have disciplinary identity. Ruth Mintz’s essay “WPAs as Historians: Discovering a First Year Writing Program by Researching Its Past” offers a tantalizing look at what that “thick description”

might really constitute. As she wanders along the paper trail left by a badly designed placement procedure, we sense that there are rich political realities waiting to be revealed in the intra-departmental memos, faculty senate minutes, and even the student essays themselves. But we get only the briefest glimpse of them before she concludes, "A first year writing program is its history" (129).

Further, though the goals and methods of local research do not require attention to all the conventions of social science research, closer documentation of the results and statistical analysis might better validate the empirically-based conclusions in some cases. In a bit of unfortunate phrasing summing up her local research, Wanda Martin writes, "Later this year we'll be in a position to analyze the data thoroughly, cobble together some rough comparisons of what we see this year with what we saw last . . . maybe even offer some cautious reports to administrators and the world at large" (50). With these conclusions she unwittingly articulates the beleaguered face of WPA research, and confirms our colleagues' worst suspicions about our work: it is anecdotal, fraught with reliability problems, and most useful when defined as "service," rather than scholarship. It suggests that our justifications for using local research are no better than what Julia Ferganchick-Neufang, in her discussion of feminist methods in WPA research, concludes: "As WPAs, often we must react to and act in circumstances not of our own making. The use of situations at hand offer research possibilities for WPAs who are too overburdened with day-to-day responsibilities to design research projects unrelated to their WPA duties" (25). With this statement, the collective sighs that accompanied "the failure strand" on WPA-L last March seem to go up again.

Finally, while the models for research on assessment outcomes, placement practices, and program design range widely in methodology and

scope, the collection seems weak on two counts. First, there is no study representing the work of the WPA at the small college. In a thoughtful article in the spring 2000 issue of *WPA*, Thomas Amorose points out that the absence of the small school story in our literature discounts both the richness of that tradition and the benefits their work might bring to the discipline. He rightly believes, "The fuller the record, the greater its richness and utility" (98). This collection would have benefited greatly from one story of the vastly different political and practical realities of the small school WPA.

Second, there is no discussion about the impact of technology on the local writing program. While perhaps it is early to expect much authoritative research, it seems strange that there is no mention, even speculative, about the likely changes on-line education will force on writing programs. What happens to assessment programs when placement tests are routinely taken on-line, the summer before students begin class? How does TA training change when half or all of all composition courses are taken on-line? How does a writing across the curriculum program accommodate a technology across the curriculum initiative on a campus? Any answers to these questions are, of course, speculative, but it might have been possible to theorize some answers out of the historical and reflective arguments in part two of the collection.

The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher comes to the edge of being a provocative, risky argument for a new kind of methodology in a changing disciplinary paradigm, but it pulls up short by not engaging the local story in complex ways, by not recognizing the diversity of experiences reflected in the stories of the small college WPA, and by not looking forward to the comprehensive role technology is likely to play in writing program administration. As a collection of best practices it will affirm what the seasoned WPA likely already does in some fashion at her own site of WPA

work, and offers for the new or prospective WPA an invaluable overview of the variety of local research that can be carried out in the service of helping students become writers. But finally, the book is a prelude to what a theory of writing program administrative practice might actually look like from a paradigmatic perspective; it is itself perhaps the story of what WPAs want that is still waiting to be told.

Works Cited

- Amorose, Thomas. "WPA Work at the Small College or University: Re-Imagining Power and Making the Small School Visible." *Writing Program Administrator*. 23.3 (2000) 85-103.

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Many instructors are combining the best qualities of writing center tutoring and peer group collaboration by enlisting "knowledgeable peers" who serve as tutors in writing classrooms and in the writing-focused classrooms of other disciplines. *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring* will explore various approaches to classroom-based writing tutorials. We seek theory-grounded manuscripts that discuss various features of classroom-based tutoring. Topics might include successful and/or unsuccessful approaches; institutional and/or classroom power relations; assessment; distribution of labor (between teachers and students, between disciplines, etc.); the dynamics of race, gender, and/or class in tutoring relationships; peer writing groups; online environments; *Writing Across the Curriculum*; and basic writing.

Please send 2-3 page proposals or completed manuscripts by March 1, 2001 to Candace Spigelman (cxs11@psu.edu) or Laurie Grobman (leg8@psu.edu), Penn State University, Berks-Lehigh Valley College, P.O. Box 7009, Tulpehocken Road, Reading, PA 19610-6009.

Re-configuring writing center partnerships: Beyond in-center tutoring

Why the urge to try new things? In my case, why not be content with a well-running, in-center peer tutoring program? Certainly, a legitimate reason for change is program development, because whatever design an institution has chosen for its writing center, that design will have limitations. In-center, generalist tutoring—my institution’s choice—only partially taps the tremendous potential of the peer writing tutors. Extending beyond in-center tutoring draws upon the writing tutors’ expertise, spreads our writing center message, and builds new relationships between students and faculty. An additional, more personal reason I have for exploring new options is that, with over a decade of running our peer tutoring program, I seek new outlets. Trying new efforts keeps me challenged and invigorated.

Hamilton College is a typical liberal arts undergraduate institution. Founded in 1987, our Writing Center annually employs 24 generalist, peer writing tutors to serve the student population of 1600 students. The writing tutor recruiting process is highly competitive. Potential tutors are nominated by faculty for consideration, and finalists are selected after rigorous screening. Each year, the writing tutor staff includes many of the college’s very best writers and represents a wide range of disciplines. Due in large part to our writing-intensive curriculum, about half of the 300 monthly writing conferences are required by faculty; the other half are voluntary.

In the past few years, we have tried a number of additional ways to draw on the tutors’ expertise beyond the physical confines of the writing center: in-class presentations, tutor/faculty con-

sultations, study groups for tutors, regional peer tutor conferences, and specialist writing tutors. Some of these outreach efforts have been successful, some not. I would like to describe these efforts and then explain why or why not these ventures have been successful on our campus.

Successful Ventures

• *In-class presentations*

Like writing tutors at many schools, our tutors visit classes to discuss a variety of topics. Our most effective class visits are those that focus on topics in which the writing tutors have genuine expertise: the revising process and peer review. Some faculty prefer to have their own students review classmates’ drafts rather than send their students to the writing center for conferences. When visiting a class to discuss peer review, the writing tutors describe the thinking process of a reader responding to a peer’s draft, pass out materials describing the typical questions the peer reader should be asking, and discuss why it’s not in the best interest of the writer that the reader focus on spelling errors, word choice, and other surface features—a tendency of most inexperienced peer readers.

• *Surveying/interviewing faculty*

Whenever a fairly plausible reason arises for doing so, we send writing tutors out to consult with faculty. The payoff for this tutor/faculty contact is high, with an immediate advantage being “face-time.” As faculty talk with writing tutors, they see for themselves the quality of the students who are writing tutors. The typical purpose of faculty/tutor exchanges is to gather information for a project we are working on at the writing center. By consulting

with our faculty, we better understand our own faculty’s expectations and how we can work together to meet our common, institutionally-specific goals.

Let me illustrate how faculty/tutor consultation typically works for us. Over the years, our writing center has developed many handouts on specific subjects related to writing, such as “Introductions and Thesis Statements,” “Elements of Persuasive Essays,” etc. Last year, two writing tutors decided that we needed a handout for students on journal writing assignments. Rather than simply write the handout on their own, they first consulted with the faculty. They e-mailed all faculty asking for comments on journal writing assignments and then met with those faculty who had provided interesting responses to the e-mail. The final handout (“Journal Writing: Bungee Jumping for the Mind”) is a blend of both tutor and faculty understanding of the Why and the How of journal writing at our college. Several faculty are quoted in the handout, which is a nice plus for them.

An unexpected outcome of this outreach effort is that a number of the professors whose comments are quoted in the final handout are faculty our writing center program does not typically serve: professors of computer science, photography, and Spanish. This year, we are continuing the same process of incorporating our faculty’s ideas, this time on the topic of evaluation of online sources for research projects. Once again, we are hearing from some faculty who usually have little contact with our program.

• *Voluntary study groups for writing tutors*

Another successful venture, one that turns inward toward the writing tutors, is the offering of voluntary study groups for tutors. Tutors periodically express interest in learning more about a topic related to their work as peer writing tutors. Such ad hoc efforts may lead to handouts for the college community or simply be used for staff development. A recent example is the group from last year that investigated the nature and structure of written argument. The four participating tutors presented their findings to the rest of the staff and wrote up their findings for inclusion in our training manual.

• **A regional writing center consortium**

A very successful example of outreach, this time to other schools, is the Upstate New York Writing Center Consortium (UNYWCC), a regional writing center consortium jointly organized by writing center administrators from institutions in central New York. The primary objective of the consortium was to offer our peer writing tutors the opportunity to talk with tutors from similar institutions about their role and to see how their experience, at their writing center, fits into the larger writing center culture.

From the start, the key goal of the consortium was to hold an annual peer writing tutor conference, drawing on features from existing writing center conferences. Our aim was to combine the inclusion and emphasis on peer writing tutors found in The National Peer Tutoring in Writing Conference with the comfortable size, intimacy, and accessibility of the New England Writing Center Association's conference, but to keep our conference even more local so that a large number of tutors could participate.

In 1994, we held the first annual UNYWCC peer writing tutor conference. By far the most important feature of the conference design was that the annual conference would be *entirely* peer tutor led; we administrators would make the event happen, but only tutors

would present, and any tutors who wished to present could do so. To keep the annual conference affordable and available to many tutors from each school, a criterion for inclusion in the consortium was that all participating colleges be within a day's driving distance. We also decided to limit participants to small, undergraduate, liberal arts institutions to keep the conversation focused and relevant for a specific group of writing tutors with common tutoring experiences. Thus, we did not include community colleges, secondary schools, or larger universities in our area. Lastly, the conference would be in November, time enough for new tutors to get some tutoring experience while still keeping seniors interested.

Four conferences later, it is fair to claim that the conference design has worked, though with a bit of tinkering. The groups have been on the small side; after a high of 80 participants for the inaugural conference, we now average about 60 participants from five schools, fewer than we originally hoped for. Even with a conference that is just a day away, it still involves a whole Saturday, and students are busy. At first, we thought we would have numerous presentations from each school, but the average number of presentations per school is now two.

We have found that the conference design can be streamlined and thus more inviting to busy students. With the goal of making the conference feel "professional," we initially required that proposals be submitted several months ahead, with the pretense of a review by the conference organizers. We have eliminated both the requirement of early submission of a full description of a presentation and the pretense of review. Now, titles and short descriptions must be submitted ahead, to encourage the tutors to think through what they will be saying and to allow for preparation of the conference schedule. But no proposals are rejected, and everyone who proposes a topic is on the program.

An additional means of streamlining, one we've tried at the opening sessions, is to divide the participants into small groups, ask every group to discuss a topic among themselves, such as ethical dilemmas in tutoring, and then report to the whole group. The advantages of this strategy are many: no one has to prepare an opening talk, the groups are mixed so the tutors right away meet with tutors from other schools, everyone gets to speak in the small group, and the entire group hears numerous perspectives on topics important to all of us.

A nice side effect of the annual conference is that tutors from different schools can get to know each other and look forward to meeting the next year (there's even been one romance thus far). The lunch conversation is lively and loud, which makes us organizers think that maybe we should aim for even less structure and more free time for the tutors to talk.

An additional, unexpected benefit of the conference is that the tutors' presentations become incorporated into permanent training materials. As a result of UNYWCC, we now have tutor-developed materials on strategies for pre-writing conferences, working with excellent first drafts, and teaching grammar so it will really stick.

The consortium has sponsored four conferences so far, at Hamilton College, Clarkson University, Colgate University, and Union College. When the National Peer Tutoring Conference in Writing was held on the Potsdam campus of the State University of New York, the consortium elected to pass on our own conference.

The consortium and its annual conference offer obvious benefits. One is that peer writing tutors from a number of schools gather to talk about their work and see that they are part of a larger, national movement to help writers learn to write better. Even the writing tutors who don't attend hear about

the conference and see that we don't work in isolation. An additional advantage is that we administrators have local colleagues to reach out to; we all know how frequently writing center administrators have to work in a vacuum on their own campuses.

Obviously, even with a streamlined and practiced conference design, it still takes committed administrators from each school for such an event to happen. Each year, someone has to shoulder the burden of arranging the conference—mailings, registration, conference program, meeting spaces, lunch, and so on. We have tried to minimize that burden by having another administrator, usually the one who will be holding the conference in the subsequent year, handle the early mailings and help with registration, but the burden falls mainly on the host institution. However, with only five or six participating schools, and an average of 60 attendees, the preparatory work for the conference is not overwhelming. Those of us involved in the consortium are excited by the opportunity it offers us and our writing tutors, and we would encourage other writing center administrators to think about forming their own local groups.

An Unsuccessful Venture

• *Specialist writing tutors*

Thus far, I have described a number of successful ways our writing center's staff and message have ventured beyond the physical confines of our center. Alas, there have been unsuccessful ventures as well. The most notable disappointment was an attempt at specialist, department-based tutoring in addition to our generalist, in-center conferences.

In our writing center, spring is always the slower of our two semesters; the earlier part of the semester is less busy due to the type of writing typically assigned second semester. Last year, we experimented with a way to capitalize on our writing tutor expertise during this slower time. Faculty were invited to submit proposals for an ex-

perienced tutor and major in their department to be assigned to work with a specific class, helping those students with their writing assignments over the course of the semester. Our expectation was that the tutor/writer relationship would be enhanced by having an experienced writing tutor who knew the subject work with students throughout the semester. Seven faculty, from psychology, biology, philosophy, and English, submitted six proposals for specialist tutors (one course was team-taught).

Of the six designs for specialist writing tutors, only one truly prospered. That one worked because the professor, in the English department, had very specific writing activities the students would do with the tutor in mandatory, weekly small group sessions.

The philosophy arrangement was fairly successful because the professor is very organized and regularly assigned individual students to work with the designated writing tutor. However, apart from the use of the designated writing tutor who was a philosophy major, this design was not so different from the standard arrangement of the generalist writing tutor being available in the writing center for conferences. The tutors' majors are posted in the center, so students have the option of selecting a tutor with specific expertise, such as philosophy.

The other designs either failed, or the results were no different than if the students had the standard access to generalist writing tutors at the Writing Center. Hence, the net result of the specialist tutor venture was a loss of writing center tutoring time.

How and why did the specialist tutor venture not work? For the other three classes, Biology, Psychology, and a second English course, the arrangement was that the designated tutor would be available in a department room on a drop-in basis for a regularly scheduled set of hours, and students would come by voluntarily, on an 'as-

needed' basis. Faculty regularly reminded the classes of the availability of their writing tutor and planned assignments suited to the idea of writing as process—with time for pre-writing, first drafts, and final drafts. The assumption was that the students would use the specialist writing tutors for help on various stages throughout the pre-writing and writing process. For these classes, conferring with the tutor was not required but was highly recommended by the professors.

What went wrong with this plan? Even though the faculty strongly and regularly recommended that students use the writing tutor throughout the writing process, few students did. What happened instead is that the students who decided to use their writing tutor all dropped in on the same night—surprise!—one or two nights before the due date for the final draft.

Alas, perhaps the most interesting of our recent efforts to venture beyond the realm of our typical, in-center service ended up being a disappointing use of writing tutor time. Why? Certainly, the coordination and organization of the designated, specialist tutor service needed some fine-tuning. Any time one tries something for a first time, there are snags. But I think the more significant reason why the drop-in, specialist tutoring did not work was that, although the students were strongly *urged* to consult with their writing tutors at each stage of the writing process, they were not *required* to do so.

The specialist writing tutor is a successful model on many campuses, but, with our campus model being the generalist writing tutor, an initial attempt to institute specialist tutors was disappointing. Some faculty were eager to get involved, which is encouraging. Adjustments in organization and coordination of the specialist tutoring effort could help, but the most significant contributing factor appears to be unwillingness of the students to consult with the writing tutor in the early pre-

writing and writing stages when not required to do so by the faculty. If we were to try this sort of service again, we would have to consider *requiring* that students meet with the tutor at some time during the early stages of invention and drafting. An alternative refinement would be to locate the tutor back in the writing center, available for regular, generalist writing conference appointments if no one from the designated class signed up.

What does the future hold for these new ventures? In-class presentations,

tutor/faculty consultations, study groups for tutors, and the regional peer tutor conference complement and enhance our current program design and will continue as part of our program. It is not clear, however, whether we will again try the more radical change in practice of using specialist writing tutors. We would have to examine the arguments for specialist tutors and rethink the coordination and organization of a specialist tutor component. Our entire curriculum is under review right now, however, so the role our writing center has carved out for itself on our

campus may well change. Who knows what the next few years will bring?

It would be interesting to hear what new ventures you have tried on your campus and how successful they have been. If you'd like to share such information, or would like copies of any of the materials mentioned in this article, please contact me at swilliam@hamilton.edu.

Sharon Williams
Hamilton College
Clinton, NY

Bowling Green State University *Writers Lab*: What's in a name?

We've been the Writing Laboratory, also occasionally shortened to Writing Lab, since our inception in 1982. This past year a letter sent to us, which was addressed to "The Writer's Lab," caught our attention. Sensitive as we are to rhetorical and grammatical adaptations (or aberrations), we took note of the difference between our said name, i.e., Writing Lab and the "mistake" appearing on the letter, i.e., The Writer's Lab. We tutors then noticed the appeal of such a "mistake."

One of our tutors, Bianca Wittmann, said, "I like the change. It obviously places more emphasis on the writer—where more emphasis should go—rather than on the writing." Another, Matt Ragan, said, "It's more personal. I like the change." Quanisha White said, "If BGSU is student-centered, then it follows that we're writer-centered." Our secretary at the time, Dawn Finn, said, "Writer's Lab sounds less painful, a little friendlier." Another tutor, Jack Vitek, said, "It's like Players Guild—it sounds classier." Theus Cassel, another tutor, said, "The new name gives a human warmth to the lab which allows the students to feel more comfortable and open to help." And one of our regular visitors, Beth Kalinsky, whose comments echoed those of other student-writers, said, "I like the change. What you do is personal and personalized, and the new

name fits those descriptions." We reveled in our similar-sounding chimes for a while as we seriously entertained the idea of a name change.

Then as might well happen in a group of grammar-minded people, a discussion about the advantages of the singular possessive version of this title (i.e. Writer's Lab) relative to the plural possessive (Writers' Lab) was broached. The singular possessive form, i.e. Writer's Lab, held sway for a while. We liked this version's focus on the individual writer, the one we collaborate with for the hour. It looked neater too—there can be something trickier looking, at times, about the plural possessive, we noted, and being user-friendly, of course, is a priority.

On the other hand, we noted that our entire lab is for any or all campus writers, not just one writer, and our motto of "writers helping writers" supported this view. The plural possessive version, Writers' Lab, then came out ahead. We then speculated that if we were having trouble with the singular possessive/plural possessive issue so might others. And we didn't want to give anyone problems figuring out how to spell us!

At this stage of our deliberative process, we consulted a trusty copy of *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel*

Manual edited by Norm Goldstein (1998). It advised us to follow these guidelines for Descriptive Phrases (in the larger context of possessives): "Do not add an apostrophe to a word ending in *s* when it is used primarily in a descriptive sense: citizens band radio, a Cincinnati Reds infielder, a teachers college, a Teamsters request, a writers guide." The Handbook provided this memory aid: "The apostrophe is usually not used if *for* or *by* rather than *of* would be appropriate in the longer form: a radio band for citizens, a college for teachers, a guide for writers, a request by the Teamsters"(163-64). That consultation helped us make a decision! We knew we were: A Lab for Writers, or the BGSU *Writers Lab*.

This name change has been beneficial in a number of ways. For one thing, referring to the writers whom we help as "writers" or "student-writers" is easier, and less awkward, than calling them "tutees." Not that we don't use the term "tutee," but we use it less often, and now we have a comfortable option, (also acknowledging the word "tutor" can be problematic, as well).

Calling those who use our services "writers" is also more accurate than referring to them as "students." Although most of the campus-writers who visit us or seek out our services may be students, they are not *our* students or may

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not be visiting us in the capacity of students, if they are working on a résumé, for example. Moreover, if we refer to them as students, the tendency is to expect us to be instructors, not tutors. And experienced tutors know how problematic that expectation can be. Countering this expectation is particularly important for those tutors who may, in a given semester, also be bonafide instructors. The name “Writers Lab” can then serve as a reminder to switch from instructor mode; however, that may be played out in a classroom, to a more collaborative mode, which is appropriate in our lab.

Our name change also reinforces the idea of peer tutoring that we espouse in keeping our services non-threatening. Calling ourselves “writers” (all of the tutors in our lab are active academic writers, if not professional writers), and calling those we help “writers” helps us to live out our motto of “writers helping writers.” In general, this change also seems to

send out a more accurate message to the greater community about where we situate ourselves in our exchanges with those who seek out our services and about our priorities.

This change has forced us to be more self-conscious, and even inconvenienced at times, in re-phrasing descriptions of ourselves and our services. But becoming more self-conscious rather than less about what we do is a good thing. Granted, this nominal move has by no means solved all of our struggles to match name with nature and to educate others about our services, but it seems a step in a good direction. Plus experiencing the excitement this change has stirred has been fun! By the way, if you’re wondering why we didn’t revise the “Lab” part of our name, it is because of the academic history and culture shared with other divisions of the university. We’ve grown up with the Math Lab and the Study Skills Lab, all of us components of the Academic Enhancement Office

of BGSU. We three labs have shared experiences and administratively strategic reasons for keeping “Lab” intact, at this point.

This recounting of our metamorphosis is not at all to say that we have placed less emphasis on writing either. On the contrary, we continue to focus on the text, but in a way that serves the needs of the human being weaving it, or so our name reminds us.

BGSU *Writers Lab* is our new name at this point in our evolution. We’ll try to keep you posted about how we continue to reinvent ourselves just as we’ll try to keep current with the re-inventions of your centers. In addition, we’ll continue to be on the lookout for serendipitous “mistakes” sent our way!

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THE WRITING LAB
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