

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 25, Number 9

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

May, 2001

...FROM THE EDITOR...

Writing centers are, as we know, centers for learning. And the cross fertilization of tutors, writers, and teachers learning from each other and from their own experiences in the center is the dominant theme in the articles in this month's newsletter. Catherine Crowley reflects on what she learned about and from ESL students while Beth Rapp Young offers what she learned from her tutors about heuristics from other fields. The companion Tutors' Columns by Rasika Welankiwar and S. R. Meins examine tutors' fears about their own competence and student fears about the tutorials they will be involved in. Joseph Zeppetello writes about what peer tutors and teachers who tutor can learn from each other, and finally, Marsha Taylor, a classroom teacher, and Buffy Boatwright, a peer tutor, offer insights into what they've learned from working in their writing center.

And, as we near the end of this year's volume of the newsletter (with the last issue in June), please note that conference and other announcements you would like in the first issue of next fall (the September issue) need to reach us by August 1. (Please see contact information on page 2.)

• Muriel Harris, editor

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Are we on the same page? ESL student perceptions of the writing center

On a normal day, the writing center at Wright State University is a bustling place. Like many other writing centers, there is a lot going on in a small space. Tutors and clients chat about assignments, crowded around tables scrawled with drawings, diagrams, and bits of language; clients read their papers aloud while tutors listen above the noise of ringing phones, the boom box, or the receptionist, like an air traffic controller, trying to accommodate last minute "walk-ins." In spite of the apparent chaos, the atmosphere is friendly and a lot of serious work is being done. In other words, the writing center is functioning just as it should.

I tutor at the writing center and also teach classes in composition, both for freshman and ESL students. Through my experience, I know how beneficial time spent in the center can be for beginning writers. However, early this quarter, I was surprised that several of my ESL students seemed less than enchanted with their required weekly tutoring sessions. As a concerned teacher, I wanted to find out why.

The following study describes the findings of a series of surveys and interviews with international students and their tutors in relation to current research on ESL writing and writing center practices. While many of the students reacted positively to questions about the writing center, too many negative responses flagged the need for further inquiry. The results of this study indicate that a greater understanding of ESL students' perceptions about the writing center may be the key to helping these students become

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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).

better and more confident writers, as well as helping tutors deal with the frustrations they sometimes feel when working with international students.

First of all, it is necessary to state here that I realize it is dangerous to make gross generalizations about international students. They, like all writers, are diverse individuals and represent a population as complex and multifaceted as any. But in the American academic community, they do represent a special population in that they are cultural outsiders. Unlike mainstream writers who have been educated in the United States, they are coming to terms with a new language, a new culture, and the conventions of an educational system which is unfamiliar to them. In order to understand their attitudes and expectations of the writing center, it is important to understand the complexity of their circumstances.

In her study, "Cultural Conflicts in the Writing Center," Muriel Harris states that when ESL students participate in writing center tutorials:

"they bring along not only their papers but also their culturally conditioned notions about what to expect in a non-classroom instructional setting. Too often they enter a learning environment that seems bewildering, threatening, frustrating, or antithetical to their prior experiences." (Harris 220)

Judith Powers, faced with a similar dilemma in the writing center at the University of Wyoming states:

"When writing center faculty, with the best of intentions, apply collaborative techniques devised for native-speaking writers to ESL writers, the possibility of cultural miscommunication and failed conferences is inherent in the methodology itself." (Powers 46)

Cultural miscommunication is a serious obstacle for non-native students. During the time they are striving to acclimate to their new environment, every-day communication tasks may re-

quire monumental patience and effort. Cultural misunderstandings can cause feelings of negativity and affect the student's motivation to learn about and participate in the target culture (Leki 44).

"Sometimes ESL students cannot explain about the problems in their writing." (ESL student)

The idea of peer tutoring is often at odds with students' assumptions about education. Muriel Harris states that ESL students tend to see teachers as the "experts and authorities." Tutors are there to help with specific problems that a teacher might point out in a student's work. They are secondary to the teacher, but should be able to help students "fix mistakes" and "solve problems" (Harris 223). In terms of intercultural communication, "power distance" describes the degree of influence or power between two persons, and applied to education, the measure of distance between the teacher and the student. "In countries with a large power distance, teachers are viewed as the holders of truth, wisdom, and knowledge, and they pass this knowledge on to their students. Thus, ESL students from countries with a large power distance are perhaps less likely to value their peers' views than are students from countries with a lower power distance (e.g. students from the United States)" (Nelson and Carson 129).

Consider the response of this student when asked if working with her tutor at the writing center had been helpful or not. "Being able to take advantage of a writing center is a privilege. But it didn't help me much in improving my English. I think that's because neither my tutor or me know more about my strength and my weaknesses than my professor."

Even though this comment may seem like a negative reflection on the tutor's ability, responses to questions about their individual tutors were over-

whelmingly positive: “She was always eager to help”; “Very enthusiastic to be a tutor”; “Very professional and understanding”; “Nice”; “Positive and friendly.” Apparently, negative reactions to tutorial sessions lie less in the ESL students’ perceptions of their individual tutors, but more in the roles that the tutors play as participants in collaborative learning.

Tutors are well indoctrinated in the methodology of the writing center. They know that “good tutors” ask questions about writers’ work, their goals and processes. They are attentive to cultural differences at the interpersonal level, and they try hard not to be too directive with their clients. Tutor training at Wright State University, and surely many others, reflects the valuable insights of a well-informed body of research about how to deal with ESL writers. Articles such as Muriel Harris and Tony Silva’s on tutoring ESL writers include advice on how to prioritize grammatical errors, understand the implications of contrastive rhetoric, and accommodate diverse cultural viewpoints (Harris and Silva 525-537). But in spite of their efforts, tutors may not realize that their essential role at the writing center situates them in the context of cultural transmitters, and culture is embodied in teaching methodologies themselves (Duff and Uchida 469). Regardless of what they say or do, or how sensitive they are to their clients, tutors working within the constructs of English composition theory are representatives of the dominant culture. They may not be aware of the “cultural and political underpinnings of their practices, materials, discourse, or teaching contexts” (477). ESL students who are not yet acclimated to the educational environment of the United States may not necessarily feel conflict with their tutors, but with the methodology itself. Such a conflict could very well be what prompts international students to make comments such as “I hate when my tutor ask me: ‘Ok, what do you want to work on today’ because I don’t really

know”; or “Overall, (my tutor) is good on terms of general talking . . . but I feel that (the writing center) waste my time.”

For international students, spending fifty minutes talking about a paper might just seem like a waste of time, especially if they are there to correct their mistakes. In the modern composition classroom, non-judgmental approaches to writing seem to be advantageous to developing writers. But native writers are likely to have been exposed to peer collaboration by the time they enter the university. According to Tony Silva, it can be a disadvantage to blindly impose mainstream educational practices on ESL writers just because they are successful with native English speaking writers. (Silva 360).

“Getting a solid thesis and support can be like pulling teeth sometimes.”
(tutor comment)

The above comment illustrates not only the conflicts brought about by collaborative learning, but also how cultural dominance is embedded in the expectations and conventions of writing assignments (Duff and Uchida 469). Obviously, issues of contrastive rhetoric influence ESL tutorials. In a 1990 study of ESL writers in the writing center at St. Cloud State University, Robinson et al. state that “[o]ne of the most difficult problems that ESL students face at American universities is writing papers in the American academic expository style” (77). They suggest that “patience and empathy are the tutor’s best ally, as the ESL writer copes with this academic culture shock” (84).

Generally, acceptable academic discourse in the American university is defined by the concept of argument, support, and a clearly stated thesis. Considering that international students come from a broad range of cultures, and within those cultures rhetorical conventions may not be the same as

expected in the United States, it is no wonder that ESL students may appear to be “not getting it” when asked to point out a thesis statement. While they may be excellent academic writers in their native languages, they may not be certain what defines a thesis, or what constitutes an acceptable argument in American academic discourse.

Judith Powers corroborates:

“Because collaborative techniques depend so heavily on shared basic assumptions or patterns, conferences that attempt merely to take the techniques we use with native-speaking writers and apply them to ESL writers may fail to assist the writers we intend to help.” (41)

Moreover, while indeed patience and empathy are well intended solutions to the perceived problems of contrastive rhetoric, it may be even more advantageous to learn about international students’ background and try to understand the seemingly odd conventions of their writing. Finding out why a student organizes her paper in a certain way may provide clues about how to introduce the conventions of American discourse.

But even more importantly, rather than looking at ESL writing as an entity which must be transformed, it may be more enriching to the academic community to recognize its diversity as a way of learning more about our own rhetoric (Powers 46). Tutors recognize the advantage of working with writers from diverse language backgrounds. Their reflections on ESL tutorials exemplify the two-way street of collaborative learning:

- “Working with ESL students challenges me to think in a different, more analytical way about language.”
- “I get a lot from the cultural exchange—it’s not just a benefit or learning situation for the ESL students.”

Scott Geisel, assistant director of the writing center at Wright State, encour-

ages communication as a way to bridge some of the cultural gaps between native speakers and international students. He encourages ESL students to “ask questions about anything. Don’t limit yourself. Realize that your tutor may view your progress as a long-term process.” And to tutors he urges, “[g]et to know your client, what they want and expect, why they’re there with you. Also let them know what kind of help you’re willing to give. Ask if you don’t understand things. Don’t assume anything.”

So what do ESL students expect from the writing center? In the long run, they want the same thing as native speakers: to become better writers. But they may view their immediate needs as different from what the tutor chooses to work on in a session. Many do want more directive tutorials. Asked to offer advice to their tutors, they stated:

- “I would like to work more on my grammar and usage of right words, as these are my weak sides.”
- “I would like to get more grammar exercises. I mean I want to have a lecture about writing.”
- “In my view point, the tutor has to teach and react according to what ESL students want and need.”

Since ESL students do not possess the intuitive knowledge of English that native speakers have, it may be essential to spend time in tutorials working on the technical aspects of language such as sentence structure and vocabulary. International students are often just learning the “building blocks” of writing that native students already possess. I am in no way suggesting that ESL tutorials be reduced to grammar lessons, but when ESL students ask for concrete examples of how to word something, they are asking because they need models. They look to their writing center tutors for examples and for “inside information” about lan-

guage. When tutors get frustrated about grammar questions on early drafts, it is important to realize that their clients are simply asking for what they have learned to ask for. Building a tutor-client relationship takes time, and it takes even more time when tutor and client do not share language as a common ground. It is unreasonable to assume that ESL students share the same background knowledge and perceptions about writing as native writers. It is equally unreasonable, however, to assume that when they ask their tutors pointed questions about form and structure, that they are approaching the session in the wrong way or merely asking for a quick fix on a paper. In fact, because of critical language and cultural differences, it is appropriate to be a bit more directive with ESL writers. The tutor in these circumstances is not merely collaborating with the writer, but becomes a “cultural informant” (Powers 45).

“We can get some knowledge which only natives understand.”
(ESL student)

Yes! A cultural informant with inside knowledge of the language and the expectations of the academic community. International students appreciate this relationship their tutors. One student wrote:

“She uses the method I call ‘best of friends’ tutoring cause she makes you really feel that she is a real friend helping you out.”

Vivian Zamel is both a compositionist and an ESL specialist. She understands that for international students, learning to write for the American university involves more than just learning the conventions of academic discourse:

“Students entering a new community must take on its ways of knowing and its ‘ways with words.’ The idea of a culture suggests the kind of immersion, engagement, contextualization, fullness of experience that is

necessary for someone to be initiated into and to be conversant in that culture, for someone to understand the ways in which that culture works.” (1)

As the quarter progressed, the international students became both more familiar with U.S. culture and more adept at their language skills. Progress reports from their tutors reflected increased engagement in writing as a process. The complaints I heard at the beginning of the quarter seemed to fade. In some cases they took a completely different direction. One of my students who was disheartened with his writing center sessions at the beginning of the quarter plans to work on his application letters for graduate school over the December break. When I announced the writing center would be closed during that time, he let out a cry of dismay, “Oh no! Just when I need it most!” In fact, by quarter’s end, many of the students stated that they do indeed plan to visit the writing center for future courses.

The responsibility of communication doesn’t lie solely with tutor and client. The ESL classroom instructor plays an essential role as well. Tony Silva in his article “On the Ethical Treatment of ESL Writers” outlines essential points for respectfully dealing with ESL writers. He states that “they need to be understood, placed in suitable learning contexts, and provided with appropriate instruction” (359). The instructor, as the ESL student’s primary contact with university culture, occupies a pivotal point in the writing center learning triangle (student-instructor-tutor). Communication must begin in the classroom. If ESL students are expected to conform to certain rhetorical conventions, then those expectations should spelled out clearly. Furthermore, a composition course should include an introduction to the writing center. Rather than simply informing students of their weekly appointments to help them with their writing, it would be of great benefit to take time

to explain what to expect in a tutorial session. Perhaps a visit to the writing center, or a model tutorial in the classroom, would do a great deal in assuaging some of the frustrations caused by conflicting expectations. Inform the students. One hour of class time devoted to learning about the writing center could save many hours of frustration. And in the true spirit of collaborative learning, Harris and Silva urge ESL instructors to work closely with writing center directors and share the experiences and knowledge gained in both the classroom and one-to-one tutoring sessions (525-537).

So it does take time. It takes empathy, and it takes patience. It takes a real willingness from tutors, clients and instructors to work together through their differences. Even more so, it takes a willingness to appreciate those differences and educate ourselves about their possible consequences. When a composition teacher and an ESL student walk through the door of the writing center and encounter the high energy, the informality, and the commotion of collaboration, they may have very different perceptions. When ESL students complain, "I do not think the atmosphere of the writing center is really nice; it is so crowded all the time and does not make me concentrate," or "Bad (atmosphere), everybody talking

and laughing, another student discussing some different subjects from mine and sitting next to me. So, I can't concentrate," let them know they can suggest moving their session to a quieter location.

In a ten week quarter, time is valuable. Rather than allowing early ESL tutorial sessions to be arenas of cultural conflict and exercises in frustration, make them productive by acknowledging and accommodating for possible conflicts either in advance or immediately as they arise. Communicate. Find common ground. Successful tutorials happen when tutor, client, and instructor are all on the same page.

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Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

May 22-23, 2001: Wheat State Writing Centers Consortium Retreat, in Lawrence, KS

Contact: Michele Eodice (michele@ku.edu) or Kristen Garrison. kgarrison@ku.edu. Conference website: <<http://www.kuce.org/app/wswc/>>.

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/>>.

Sept. 14-15, 2001: Midwest Writing Center Association, in Iowa City, IA

Contact: SuEllen Shaw, shaws@mnstate.edu, or Cinda Coggins, CCoggins66@aol.com. Conference website: <www.ku.edu/~MWCA>.

Losing Touch?

Within the next couple of weeks, I'll send out "losing touch" postcards to subscribers with 8/01 expiration dates. That's to encourage you to take care of business before you leave for the summer! Run, don't walk, to your business office with your postcard—before you leave campus! . . . and check up on it as soon as you return!

Mary Jo Turley, Managing Editor
Writing Lab Newsletter

Using heuristics from other disciplines in the writing center

Many writing centers have some sort of training program for new peer tutors. Training doesn't have to stop there, however. Every class can be, in some sense, a training class for the writing center, because every discipline has useful methods of thinking and learning to offer. Given the opportunity for reflection, peer tutors can identify these methods for themselves and share them with their colleagues, reinforcing the training they receive as peer tutors.

These methods can be thought of as "heuristics" for consulting. The word "heuristic" is usually used in relation to the invention stage of writing, when we use it to come up with new ideas. For example, W. Ross Winterowd describes a heuristic as, "A method of invention consisting of a series of probes or questions with two purposes: to help writers recall information that they already possess and to open aspects of a topic that can be investigated (for instance through library research) . . . The most widely known heuristic is the journalist's questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why?" (50).

But the original definition, as stated by Richard E. Young and his co-authors in *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*, is a little broader:

A "heuristic" . . . is a codification of a particular sort of cognitive skill; it is a plan designed to help one in carrying out complex, non-routine activities for which trial and error is undesirable or unmanageable, and for which we lack a rule-governed plan (even though it might be usefully developed) or for which a rule-governed plan would be impractical or impossible. It helps us translate knowledge about something into knowledgeable practice. (qtd. in Winterowd 50-1)

This certainly describes working in a writing center. Consulting is a complex activity; it is not routine, and we don't want to rely only on trial and error! Plus, consulting is so complicated that simple "rules" about what to "always" do won't be very helpful. So writing consultants can definitely benefit from heuristics.

Writing consultants bring heuristics from other disciplines, perhaps without even knowing it. The following strategies were developed with consultants from the writing center at the University of Alabama in Huntsville during training workshops. Each of these writing consultants identified heuristics from their own majors that could be applied to their work in the writing center:

Nursing—Kim Weber

Many similarities exist between nursing and working in a writing center. Just as a nurse's clients (many nurses prefer the term "client" to the more passive term "patient") often arrive confused, anxious, and uncertain about how to be an active part of the healing process, a writing consultant's clients are confused, anxious, and uncertain how to revise their paper. Nurses focus on improving the client's quality of life (rather than just healing the injured or sick body), and writing consultants focus on helping the client become a better writer (rather than just fixing the paper). And just as a nursing care plan is the foundation for the treatment process, a writing consultant can develop a care plan. Using a care plan can ensure that the consulting is client-centered, specific, and realistic.

Parts of the care plan are outlined below:

Assess: Nurses are careful to focus on the client, not on the injury. To do this, they assess the situation and assign a

nursing diagnosis that is related to, but not the same as, a doctor's diagnosis. For example, if the doctor's diagnosis is "lacerated hand," the nursing diagnosis might be "pain." This strategy can be translated to a writing center context, where the teacher's diagnosis of "no thesis" could be matched with the writing consultant's assessment, "writer unsure about where to take a stand."

When making the assessment, nurses are careful to give both subjective (what the client experiences) and objective (what the nurse observes) reasons for the diagnosis. A subjective reason might be "Client experiences pain"; an objective reason might be "Client appears distracted, is frowning." In the same way, a writing consultant could look for subjective reasons ("Writer feels that neither side is 100% right") and objective reasons ("Writer makes contradictory statements, sighs in frustration") for the assessment.

Plan: A nurse will set attainable goals with the client, making sure those goals are measurable and timed: "Client will state pain is 0 on a 0-5 scale by second day post-op." These goals are created to serve the client's best interest, not the nurse's best interest. In the same way, a consultant can work with the writer to set specific, attainable goals: "Client will choose a side, and will know strategies for addressing counter-arguments in a paper, by the end of the consultation."

Interventions: Choose actions which effectively help the client achieve goals. These actions should require active participation from the client, and they should be individualized to accommodate the needs of each client. For example, a nursing intervention might be, "Allow client to express feel-

ings of pain.” A consulting action might be, “Take notes on ideas expressed by the client, then review the notes with the client.”

Rationale: Give explanations for each intervention. These should be reinforced with professional sources: “Allowing patient to express feelings decreases anxiety, thereby decreasing pain” (Christensen and Rockrow), or “Taking notes on a writer’s ideas can help her see her own ideas on the paper” (Clark).

Evaluation: After the time allotted in the plan has elapsed, evaluate the effectiveness of each intervention to see if the goal has been reached. “Gave pain medication as prescribed; patient stated pain as ‘0’,” or “After discussing the list of her ideas, the writer chose a position to argue and she planned to use her contradicting ideas as counter-argument.”

Engineering—Cindy Hughey

If your university has an engineering school, you’ve probably heard someone say, “Engineers can’t write” with so much confidence that you’d think the phrase was some kind of by-law! But engineers—and writing consultants who major in engineering—have an advantage they may not recognize. Engineers are taught a process which can also be applied to writing, and to consulting about writing. While engineering design processes can be quite elaborate, depending on what is being designed (Ertas and Jones), the basic parts of the process remain the same.

The process:

Gather information. For an engineer designing a suspension bridge, this might include library research on other bridge designs, and/or collecting data about the bridge location. A writer will want to gather information about the subject of the paper. A writing consultant gathers information about the writer’s goals and progress so far. This data must be sorted and analyzed in order to proceed to the next step.

Find connections in the data. Finding connections should be undertaken both subconsciously (e.g., imagining a possible bridge design) and consciously (e.g., systematically evaluating the data to test the suitability of the imagined design). A writer might imagine a possible thesis and investigate the data collected so far to see how it might support that thesis. A writing consultant might imagine a plan for the consultation and ask questions to make sure the plan will fit the writer’s needs.

Develop a solution. An engineer drafts a skeleton of the design—this draft will be revised as the work progresses. Similarly, a writer sketches a rough paper outline, and a writing consultant outlines a plan for the consultation.

Apply solution. An engineer develops the skeleton into a complete design for a bridge. Similarly, a writer drafts a paper, and a writing consultant proceeds with the consultation.

Revise and correct for error. As the bridge is built, an engineer knows that the plans have to be revised to take into account unforeseen factors and other possible problems in the bridge design. Writers also revise and rework their papers to make sure the end product accomplishes their original purpose. And writing consultants must be ready to change strategies if their original plan doesn’t meet the writer’s needs.

Of course, engineers would probably explain all of these steps with a flow

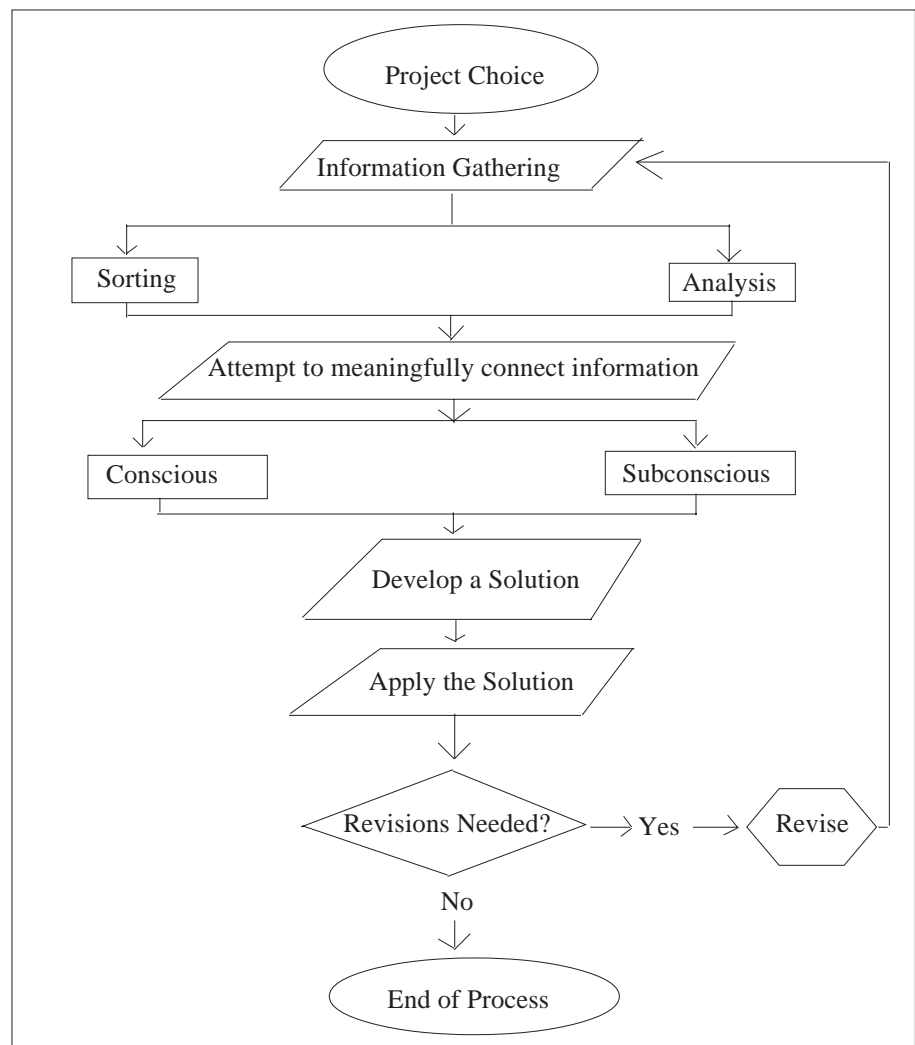


Table 1: The Engineering Process

chart! The engineering process can be very useful in understanding the writing process.

Drawbacks and benefits of using cross-disciplinary heuristics:

Techniques from other disciplines should be applied with care, of course. Some concepts will be a better fit than others. Writing centers may resist the medical overtones of a nursing care plan, for example, since the “writing center as hospital” metaphor carries with it so many negative aspects (Carino). And writing center directors, many of whom have a background in the humanities, may find flowcharts to be confusing, or confining.

Also, no heuristic is likely to be useful in every consulting situation. A nursing care plan, which often has a long-term emphasis, may not meet the needs of a writer whose paper is due in an hour. A writer may need more positive feedback than the engineering process flowchart provides. In order to decide whether a given heuristic is useful, consultants still need to consider “traditional” concerns such as the type of paper being written, the abilities of the writer, the writer’s goals (and motivation to achieve those goals), and the paper deadline.

So consulting can never be reduced to “10 easy steps.” In fact, no discipline can; you may even disagree with the various heuristics writing consultants have presented here. The chief benefit of looking for useful heuristics in other disciplines is that these are concepts writing consultants will already know from coursework in their majors. In fact, consultants are likely to draw on this knowledge, consciously or unconsciously, as they work with writers, even when you don’t discuss it in the writing center. So it’s worth addressing concepts from a consultant’s “home” major, if only to give consultants the opportunity to critically examine which concepts “work” in a writing center setting, and which do not.

Drawing connections to other disciplines has several other benefits:

- Making connections to what they already know can ease the terror of new consultants.
- Once consultants are aware of how they do their jobs, they can more easily change the “how” for different situations, consciously adding new strategies to their repertoire.
- Developing explicit knowledge of different strategies allows consultants to share strategies with others.

Many writing centers hire writing consultants from different disciplines in large part to enrich the writing center’s services. But interdisciplinarity involves more than simply a familiarity with different citation styles. We can draw on the interdisciplinary backgrounds of writing consultants in order to discuss different ways of knowing, and different ways of knowing can offer expanded perspectives on our work in the writing center.

Ideas for using interdisciplinary knowledge in the writing center:

What can writing centers do to draw on interdisciplinary knowledge in the writing center? Here are some ideas which have been used successfully in writing centers:

- Hire writing consultants from different disciplines.
- Schedule different consultants to work at the same time, so they can overhear each other at work.
- Plan opportunities for writing consultants to talk to each other about their work.
- Ask writing consultants to observe one another, or videotape consultations and trade videos.
- Assign writing consultants to think consciously about concepts or activities from their major which might apply to their work in the writing center.
- Invite colleagues from different disciplines to teach consultants about useful concepts or strategies.

All of these ideas encourage writing consultants to draw connections between disciplines. In a *Writing Lab Newsletter* article, Phil Hey and Cindy Nahrwold insist—in their title, no less—that “Tutors aren’t trained—they’re educated.” Hey and Nahrwold go on to talk about the importance of educating writing consultants in composition theory, but it’s worth expanding on that idea of “educated” consultants. After all, writing consultants are educated in ways that go beyond the scope of a course in writing center theory and methods. One sign of such education (and some would say, “intelligence”) is the ability to draw connections between ideas. Writing consultants should be able to take ideas from one context and apply them to another.

When writing consultants do this, it is clear that every class can be a consultant “training” class.

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Orlando, FL

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TUTORS' COLUMN

There must be a mistake . . .

I entered the writing center on my first day of the Advanced Writing Seminar to begin my training as a tutor, and I thought that I would faint. "There must be a mistake," I remember thinking, "I can't possibly be in the same class as *these* people."

Don't get me wrong, I did not dislike any of the other students, but they intimidated me. One of the girls had written a book and planned on pursuing a career writing historical fiction. The girl sitting next to her had stage managed the past three or four drama productions, attended a genetics camp run by Johns Hopkins University during the summer, and as far as I knew, had never received below an A- on her report card. I automatically assumed that she also had a strong handle on writing. The third girl, one I had known since pre-school but lost touch with as we grew older, struck me as the artsy-very-intelligent-writer-type. The fourth and final student was a boy a year ahead of me, and also very involved in drama. I had never met him before, but in my nutty little head I made the connection that if a person acted well, he also wrote well.

I began the Advanced Writing Seminar without a single piece of writing for which I felt the slightest bit of pride. I basically got pushed into the class when I had scheduling problems. My guidance counselor convinced me I would do fine in this course since I took honors English, but seeing my classmates, I thought, what does he know? I had never taken a writing course before, and I thought for sure that my skills as a writer were far below those of my classmates'. This course *was* designed to improve my writing skills and at the same time train me as a tutor to help others improve

their writing, but I still had a lot of inhibitions.

Part of the tutor training entailed letting my classmates read my work and give me oral and written feedback, but I did not understand how they would do that. I mean, they'd be laughing so hard at my attempts to write that I'd be impressed if they could even hold a pen, let alone write with one. As for verbally giving me advice, forget it. Between suppressing their giggles and trying to keep a straight face, articulating any type of word would be impossible. My writing was so bad . . . what had I gotten myself into?

This class was going to be tough. And I was right. It was tough, but I did it, and best of all, no one laughed at me! Instead they actually found aspects of my paper that they liked. I couldn't believe it. The aspiring historical fiction novelist said my examples did a good job demonstrating my points, and my pre-school buddy commented on my word choice. The older drama boy liked my topic, and the genetics girl liked my voice . . . I didn't even know I had a voice!

Of course they also offered me their constructive criticism, which I appreciated just as much as their praise. Considering the suggestions of my classmates and taking a closer look at my writing, I slowly but surely started to advance as a writer. I began to see the importance of writing techniques, such as avoiding "to be" verbs, a tip that I had heard about in English class but with which I had little hands-on experience. I discovered the magic way topic sentences could improve organization and the amazing way thesis statements could create a focus. Most importantly, in the midst of it all I

learned that there was hope for me as a writer after all.

After I gained more confidence in my writing skills, I began to feel more comfortable tutoring and offering my classmates advice. At first, since I had already decided at the beginning of the course that all of my classmates were phenomenal writers, I regarded their papers as perfect even before I began reading them. I did not believe that little old me could ever help them improve their writing. I had to try so hard to look at the papers with an objective point of view without any preconceived notions. As I started to view my writing abilities in a more positive light, I began to ask myself questions while editing like "Would I add an example here if I were she?" or "Do I feel like this conclusion has wrapped everything up?" Then based on my opinions, which I now believed had some substance behind them, I could finally give some solid feedback to those whose opinions I valued so much.

When I walked into the writing center on that first day, I made the assumption that since these students had such strong writing skills I would never be able to keep up with them in a tutoring situation. I now know that to help others improve their writing, knowing what makes a good paper is just as important as being able to write a good paper. Even though I did not have as much writing experience as my classmates, I still could recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their work. By the end of my experience, I came to the realization that even the best writers need tutors. Who would have guessed?

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The watermelon eater: A tutor in the writing center

Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry. — Paulo Freire

Once there was a man, begins the Sufi teaching story, who traveled from town to town. One day while traveling he came upon a peaceful village and as he got nearer he could hear people yelling and running. Soon a crowd of villagers passed him on the road. They were shouting, warning him to turn around if he knew what was good for him, because there was a monster out in the field. The man said that he had never heard of such stupidity and went to the field to see for himself. When he got there, he couldn't believe his eyes. He pointed at the villagers and began to laugh. "That is no monster, you fools," the man roared, "that is a watermelon." Then with one quick movement he broke the melon over his knee, dug into it with his hands, and put a big piece into his mouth. He was grinning ear to ear when the villagers pounced on him with their hands, their shovels, and their rakes because they were more afraid of a man who could kill and eat the monster than they were afraid of the monster itself.

The next year a different man who traveled from town to town came upon the same peaceful village. He too found himself in the midst of a terrified mob running from the fields, but when he saw that it was only a watermelon he instead waved his arms in the air and ran away yelling louder than anyone had ever yelled before. Later, the man returned to the village with the villagers and began to live with them. The man got to know them all by their

names. He helped the shepherd tend his flock. He helped the blacksmith tend his fire. He helped the baker shape his bread, and he helped the clergy with the wounded. He helped the farmers with their fields, and he helped the merchants with their stock rooms.

One day while working in the shop of the blacksmith, the man heard a commotion. He knew right away that the monster was once again in the field. So the man went out into the street and joined the running villagers, but this time, as they neared the edge of the village, he stopped them. He talked to them and led them out into the field. Once they were all there, he walked up to the watermelon and poked it. He rolled it from side to side and thumped it with his fingers. And he sniffed it. Then he took his knife out and cut it open. All the villagers watched as the man put a piece of the melon in his mouth. The villagers all came closer to the man, and he cut off a piece of watermelon for each of them. They all ate, smiling, and shaking their heads happily.

This is a story of a wise man and a fool, among other things of course. And I tell it here first, before telling anything else, as a sort of nervous explanation for the things I want to explore with you as your tutor. I am afraid that I may appear to be a little too much like the first man in the story, the fool who strides into town all full of himself and boastfully points out what appears to him to be the obvious—and then of course meets a terrible fate at the hands of the villagers. I am not going to say that I am anything but a fool, but I would much rather like to deceive myself into believing that I am more like the wise man in the story,

the second man who is wise not because of his knowledge, but because of his kindness, and because of his willingness to discover right along with the others the limitations of his fears and the possibilities of his hopes. The second man, the wise man, knows that truth comes of itself in due time, and that it is made up of friendship and compassion.

Since as a tutor I can not get to know you as the second man in the Sufi story gets to know the inhabitants of the village, by living with and working with them everyday, I can only hope to be trusted when I say that the monsters in the fields of our lives are most often not monsters at all. They exist only as long as we see them as monsters. When we educate ourselves, learn by experience, and change our perceptions, the monsters become only the sweet fruit in the fields of our future.

In the short time we will have together I will try to tell you who I am. I will work with you to make a friendship we can rely on, based on trust and the work that we do together. We will approach what we need to learn as the traveling wise man approached the villagers, with compassion toward their possibilities and not arrogance in the face of their limitations. But most importantly we must approach ourselves like the wise man approached the watermelon, as a fruit ripe and bursting possibilities, if only we can learn to touch upon it with wisdom instead of fear.

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Great and not-so-great expectations: Training faculty and student tutors

The Writing Center was implemented at Marist College in 1994, and presently has between 800-1000 sessions per academic year. Since we do not have a large graduate program, our tutors are drawn from full and part-time faculty. While, theoretically, any professor from any discipline can be a tutor, what has generally been the case is that we have a preponderance of humanities-trained professors, and in particular, English professors. We started offering tutor internships for fourth-year English majors in 1997.

Our first interns were very successful, and added an interesting dimension to our staff. They also presented a problem regarding training in that we needed to work them into our existing shadow/mentoring system. Like Liz Buckley and Barbara Jensen, both strong advocates of using mentors in tutor training, I feel that mentoring is very important and wanted to keep the mentoring component of our training. We, however, needed to decide if we wanted to implement special training over and above the existing shadow/mentoring system that we used for the faculty tutors, which entailed new tutors "shadowing" experienced tutors. The consensus was that we simply include the interns in the training program, and treat them as colleagues. As one of our first interns wrote in his journal, "The meetings were like *Cheers* for English professors, 'Where everyone knows your name.'"

The shadow/mentoring aspect of tutor training for student tutors was essentially the same as for our faculty tutors. As part of their training, new student interns were assigned to a shift with experienced tutors to observe for a week or two, then encouraged to "jump in" when they felt ready to tu-

tor. Student tutors were assigned to participate in the weekly meetings, and were required to keep a journal with a minimum of one entry per week to hand in for their final grade. All internships are taken on a Pass/Fail basis.

Student interns brought a very different set of expectations to the training sessions. While my original concern with assessment was the effectiveness of the shadow/mentoring system in training student tutors and new faculty tutors together, I found that the two groups brought completely different outlooks to the training. While the usual questions regarding facilitative tutoring that came from new faculty tutors dealt with the distinctions between tutoring and teaching, the concerns and expectations of the student interns were quite different. For the most part, they were concerned with being accepted into the cultural community of the Writing Center, where they were outnumbered four to one. Where a faculty colleague had no problem explaining why he/she handled a tutorial session in a certain way, the student interns were very sensitive to criticism, and concerned with "getting it right." I decided to analyze this difference by recording conversations from our weekly meetings, and comparing the journal entries of new faculty tutors and student interns. The semester this analysis was done found us with only one student tutor, a graduating senior, and two new faculty tutors. Our other tutor had been wait-listed for a program in England, and found out she could go at the last minute. The differences in expectations and outcomes came to light in the training session conversations.

Our training sessions usually start with a student text brought to the meet-

ing by one of the faculty tutors. We all read the text, and then begin a general discussion. Questions that arise are the usual: How would you begin a tutoring session with this text? What would be your focus? How would you facilitate? How much teaching, if any at all, should you do? How strongly should you adhere to the strict facilitative model? In one particular session we looked at a paper that was written for a Classics in Western Literature course. Both new and experienced faculty tutors immediately focused on problems of ambiguity and structure in the essay, and where to draw the line between teaching and tutoring. I've selected some of their comments below to illustrate the main concerns with the paper held by the faculty tutors:

- We need to focus on the very first sentence; there is an ambiguity in the word "Race."
- Help the student find a word he/she really means.
- I *like* the ambiguity in the first sentence.
- We need to help the student reaffirm the message regarding the human race and talk about clarity.
- This is a case of too many metaphors; this makes the paper incomplete.
- The student needs to be shown that he/she hasn't done much.
- There is an outline of an answer here. The paper needs to be completely restructured.
- How do we do that? We are tutoring, not teaching.
- What is wrong with this paper exactly? Do we talk about spelling and grammar?
- No. We need to get the student to back up any statements.

Notice that the comments by the fac-

ulty tutors focused mostly on the problems of ambiguity, paper structure, and backing up an answer with clear statements. In other words, they were very “teacherly” concerns, and as teachers they were alert to the question as to how much teaching they should do in a case where a paper is generally lacking any real focus. Indeed, the paper as it stood was a failure, and the student had been given a chance to rewrite. On the other hand, our intern tutor made comments regarding the paper that showed a different perspective even though he had essentially the same training as the new faculty tutors. Below are selected comments made by the student intern.

(I) Maybe we should ask to see the question? I am very concerned with the awkwardness of the writing. Not only does the metaphor fall flat; it is not clear. In fact, it seems to be just taking up space.

(I) I’m not even sure what course this paper is for. I think the student just got an idea and started writing —needs to organize an answer to the question.

(I) Do we give remedial help here?

The student tutor was more directly concerned with how well the student addressed the question that had been asked, or what the question specifically was, realizing that the failed metaphor may have come from the assignment, something none of the faculty tutors thought of. He also demonstrated a student-centered concern by pointing out that the writer of the text in question may require more help to get “up to speed.” He approached the tutoring problem from the perspective of one who is being graded, and as such, had more specific concerns with helping the writer improve the grade. Later in the conversation he even mentioned the fact the “institution is here with us,” reminding the faculty tutors that there are requirements for papers that are outside the purview of the Writing Center. The student tutor approached the writing as one who is concerned

with *getting* grades, where the faculty tutors belonged to a community who was in the business of *giving* grades.

Another conversation took place regarding a tutor exercise I wrote after giving an assignment to a College Writing I class. The assignment was to compare an excerpt from John Henry Newman with an essay by Adrienne Rich. I tried to incorporate every problem I found in the papers that were handed in. Again, there was a difference in the concerns of the student tutor and the faculty tutors. For instance, the faculty tutors focused on the general flow of ideas, or lack thereof, in the sample paper. Then they focused on the ambiguity of the assignment, claiming it was a bad assignment. Their conversation then turned toward the difference between tutoring and teaching. The student tutor was more concerned with the failed mechanics of the paper, and in helping the student resist the poor assignment. The conversation of the faculty tutors went as follows:

- I think this “student” is struggling. The conclusion is the classic non-conclusion.
- This seems artificial, since you wrote it, but there are some important problems here. I can guess that this student does not know what a response paper is.
- No. He certainly does. He responded.
- You think the question is too vague?
- Yes. Definitely, especially for freshmen.
- No, the question is fine. Look, we see papers like this every day. What I would do is ask the student some questions. Why did he think that Adrienne Rich wants us to change education? What is it that Newman means by a “liberal” education?
- Ask him about those differences.
- I still think the question is too broad. You’re asking for trouble with an assignment like that.

part of the conversation. Our student tutor made only one or two remarks about paper organization. The surprise came when the conversation shifted to a discussion of what made a good assignment. Both the new and experienced faculty tutors struggled with what a good assignment should look like, but then one of the new faculty tutors asked what we should do with a bad assignment. Our student intern gave an interesting answer to the problem, and the conversation went something like this. The contributions made by the intern is designated by (I):

- What do you do with a dumb writing assignment?
- Depends on the student.
- She’s bright and struggling with it, and is resisting with no end.
- (I) Help her resist.
- And fail?
- (I) I’ve resisted bad assignments before, and my professors didn’t mind.
- Really? At Marist?
- (I) You can resist a bad assignment if you do it right.

The faculty tutors were amazed that this resistance was at all possible. Our student intern claimed that he and some friends had not only resisted bad assignments, but also had professors change the assignment, and in some cases change the grade. Our student intern kept bringing up something our sometimes overly theoretical discussions kept forgetting—students are in the business of getting grades. The more precocious will call a professor to task for a poorly developed assignment if only to get a better grade.

This open-ended conversation, where the student tutor, new tutors, and experienced tutors all have equal input tends to level the field; we learn from each other. We all try not to sound like “super tutor,” and it is my job to keep egos in check (including my own). This general discussion, group-mentoring session sets up the second element of tutor training, one-on-one mentoring. Our student intern and the

The faculty tutors dominated this

new faculty interns were allowed to shadow an experienced tutor, and then handle a tutorial session on their own. It became evident again that the two groups of tutors had two very different needs and reactions to the one-on-one mentoring. Below, I have excerpted some thoughts from the journals of two new faculty tutors. They were mainly concerned with the differences between tutoring and teaching as demonstrated by these excerpts: (I have designated the faculty tutors as F1 and F2).

F1: I have discovered that tutoring requires a different mind set than teaching. In the Writing Center I only have time for first aid, no major surgery. I find the most glaring problems and address them. I am coaching.

F1: One spin-off of this process has been a feeling of comradeship with other faculty members. Students come in with assignments that remind me of mine. We are all trying to get students to engage the ordered creativity that is writing.

F2: I have to say that tutoring is more demanding and less rewarding than teaching. When I teach I am in full control of the situation, and know what to expect from the students. When tutoring I may have only a hazy idea of the subject matter.

F2: I do not have time to build a rapport with students. I usually only see them once.

The faculty tutors were involved with the similarities and differences between tutoring and teaching. One in particular found tutoring to be less rewarding than teaching, and decided not to work for us after one semester. The comment "I do not have time to build a rapport with students" shows that this tutor had a problem defining the relationship to the student. This faculty member is noted for being popular with students, and I found it curious that there was such resistance to the role of tutor. The other faculty tutor,

while expressing a certain frustration with the limits of what could be done in a tutoring session, found the experience rewarding and engaging, and gave a feeling of "comradeship."

The following excerpts come from the student intern's journal. They show a completely different focus on the mentoring and tutoring experience.

(I): I had my first "client" today; I admit that I was very nervous. I was afraid that I wouldn't catch all of his mistakes. Dr. A. told me that if I did make a mistake, it would not be the first or the last. I really like working in academia.

(I): Yesterday I tutored two students, and Professor M. got to observe me. We discussed icebreakers to ease a student's nervousness. One of the students today had read everything she needed to read, but didn't know where to begin. We brainstormed and outlined her essay. She felt more relaxed with the assignment.

(I): I had the biggest challenge yet today, an adult student that took one hour and forty-five minutes to help. (Author's note: our typical session is 30 minutes.) He had extremely awkward sentences. I fixed a couple and set them as examples; he worked on the rest. I ended up giving him a handout on comma usage.

(I): I was directly asked for input at today's meeting. I gave my opinion, and the others respected it. The results of my input were dwarfed by the fact that my input is needed, as well as respected and appreciated by my academic superiors.

Conclusions

While these excerpts are necessarily condensed, I think they present some very basic differences between the concerns and conditions of a student intern and the concerns and conditions of a new faculty tutor. The intern was,

as are most students, concerned with failing, and with not doing well in the eyes of the other tutors. Much of the intern's journal writing was concerned with being accepted as a peer. The faculty interns tended to be concerned with the difference between tutoring and teaching. In other words—which hat should they wear in a tutoring session? In some cases the peer tutor's lack of teaching experience actually helped get him to the nuts and bolts of tutoring. "I helped him with his sentences, and gave him a handout on comma usage." The faculty tutors were more concerned with defining their relationship to the tutee, and felt constrained by the practical and institutional limits of the tutoring session. "I have time only for a band-aid." "I do not have time to build a rapport with students."

The shadow/mentoring system, coupled with weekly group mentoring sessions seems to be the best for a small Writing Center. New student and faculty tutors both successfully tutor in a short time. This method has the strength of individual attention, and tutors do not get "lost" in the system. Two random exit surveys have shown that students using the Writing Center respond well to new tutors, and have a high degree of satisfaction with their tutorial session regardless of whether the tutor was a faculty member or a student. This system also has the added strength of giving the new tutors the specific guidance they need. Faculty tutors get to fine-tune the differences between teaching and tutoring, especially through the use of student texts. Student interns need more specific guidance and to be reassured that they are doing the right thing. This system of training also has the added dimension of training two distinct groups who have two sets of priorities and expectations for what is essentially the same task. Drawbacks to this system of training are that it is time consuming, and it can be a slow process. Our Writing Center, like so many others, gets very busy early in the semester. The

shadow/mentoring method, by its very nature, requires a longer time-line that runs concurrently with actual writing tutorial sessions than a formal training session, which could be implemented in late August or early September, just at the start of the academic year. One other problem that came to light after reading Liz Buckley's article, "Distance Mentoring: The Mentoring is in the E-mail," was that our mentoring was confined to the four walls of the Writing Center. I hope to implement an e-mail mentoring program involving tutors from other colleges, and tutors who previously worked in our Writing Center, in the near future to complement our existing training program.

In spite of the drawbacks, I feel our tutor training has a lot to recommend it as long as we stay aware of the different needs and expectations of faculty and student tutors. A shadow/

mentoring tutor training method coupled with group discussion (I sometimes call this group mentoring) is almost a non-system, which is appealing. This non-system seems to supply what is needed for both the student intern, who comes to the program with practical academic considerations, and the faculty tutor, who is more concerned with tutoring as a teacher. Authority does not rest with me as the Writing Center Director. I can push authority out to the other tutors, and choose to say very little in the course of a meeting. The phonocentric nature of this method of tutor training is also appealing. It takes place in the actual medium that a tutoring session must take place and helps break down the tension between speaking and writing. Since performing this analysis, I have become very sensitive to the different and sometimes conflicting needs, expectations, and outcomes of the student tu-

tors and faculty tutors. I feel, however, that this system of tutor training, through interchange, exposure to, and awareness of, different perspectives found in student and faculty tutors can give us a useful *synthetic* approach to tutor training. Such an approach gives us an excellent way to train new tutors, and keep experienced tutors fresh.

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Classroom teacher or writing center tutor? Wearing two hats

The Writing Center has been in existence at Francis Marion University for over ten years, and I have been involved with it since the beginning. Each year we help hundreds of students from all over campus, in every discipline, with an amazing variety of writing assignments. We pride ourselves on what we do for our students, but seldom do we think about what working in the Writing Center does for us, the classroom teachers and future classroom teachers who staff it. What Buffy and I want to discuss here is what we have learned from tutoring in the Writing Center, and how we can apply it to composition teaching.

One of the first things I noticed when I began tutoring was how my relationship with students changed as I shifted from the role of teacher to tutor. As a tutor, I was no longer an authority figure holding a grade book, but more a concerned listener. In the one-on-one setting of the tutorial, the students felt free to talk openly to me about their lives, school, and how they felt about

writing and the writing tasks they were asked to perform. What I learned made me question many of the things I thought I knew about writing and how to teach it.

As an aging baby-boomer (the same generation that is now writing the composition textbooks), I had based many of my ideas on the writing process on my own college experiences. I had gone to a mostly residential four-year college, lived in the dorm, had no outside jobs, and considered college, both in the classroom and out, my universe. In contrast, at Francis Marion, most of our students are commuters, almost all of them work, and many already are parents. Most of them have no contact with their classmates outside of class, and have no one in their personal worlds who understand what going to college is all about. I soon realized that what had worked for people like me was not going to work for them.

For example, a conventional approach to the writing process might be

to give an assignment on Monday, require a rough draft on Wednesday and a final draft on Friday. The assumptions were that a student, with the help of a composition textbook and classroom instruction, would somehow steer herself through the writing process. Think how this would work with a typical student I'll call Terri—a bright, personable, articulate young lady I tutored recently.

Terri is an eighteen-year-old freshman. In the course of her tutoring session she told me that she "didn't learn much in English" in high school, her parents were divorced when she was eight, and she's been pretty much on her own since she was fifteen as she worked a wide assortment of minimum wage jobs. Currently she works from thirty to forty hours a week at a popular restaurant where she waitresses and stocks the salad bar. She admits that she doesn't have a draft of her paper yet, but has some ideas. She then lets me in on her writing process. She thinks about the assignment at work—

trying out ideas, mentally composing, and editing as she goes. A particularly creative time, she says, is when she's chopping the vegetables for the salad bar. When she can grab a few minutes, she will sit down and quickly write out her paper.

As I listened to Terri, I realized how far her writing process was from mine as a student, when I had the luxury of writing and revising multiple drafts and the opportunity to bounce ideas off friends in late-night gab sessions. On the other hand, it was a lot like my current writing process as a harried working mother, where I often planned my classes and did my own writing in my

head as I folded laundry, carpooled, or sat on the bleachers at Little League.

What, then, can I do in my classroom to help our students? Over the years, and mostly through trial and error, I've come up with some strategies that seem to work.

First, I've adopted the concept of my composition classroom as a community of writers. In simple terms, we're all writers, we're at different levels of experiences, but we all want to get better and we're going to help each other. One way to achieve these goals is to try to bring into the classroom the good things that work in the Writing Center:

other writers to listen to our ideas and give us feedback, and a comfortable and non-judgmental atmosphere. We do a lot of group work, from brainstorming to editing each other's papers. Often students will "workshop" their papers by reading drafts of a work in progress to the group, and we all offer comments and suggestions. I often do assignments with my students, and we talk about my work along with theirs. I also tend to give fairly long lead times on assignments, and we do a lot of revision. My students' English class, like the Writing Center, is a place where they get interest, feedback, and respect.

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My experience in the writing center

I have been working a little over three years in the Francis Marion Writing Center. At first, I was nervous about having to read and critique other people's work. However, something in me kept telling me that if I plan on being an English teacher, this job could be more than just a job; it could become a valuable learning experience. And it has! I have learned much more from working one-to-one with the students than I have from reading any textbook. Working in the Writing Center has helped enhance my communication skills with the students. It has sharpened my content knowledge, provided me with a setting to connect the theories I have learned to actual practice, and helped me develop in the area of professionalism.

First, and most importantly, learning about methods, theories, and ideologies in my educational classes can only prepare me so much. The real test comes when I have to take these obscure and abstract theories and apply them to my future students. By working in the Writing Center, I have had opportunities to take the ideas that I am learning about and apply them to real students with real assignments. I have been exposed to dealing with difficulties such as plagiarism, dialect interfer-

ence, sensitive topics, and reluctant or even hostile clients.

I can remember the first time I had to deal with a client whom I thought might be committing plagiarism. She was an international student from Japan, and she was working on a business paper. I noticed that her vocabulary, sentence structure, mechanics, and voice had changed in places. I knew that she had copied several paragraphs from the articles that she was using. I asked her if she knew about giving other authors credit when using their materials, and she nodded affirmatively.

I, however, was not convinced that she was making this error purposefully. I pointed out a sentence, and asked her if she had written this sentence herself. She then shook her head no and proceeded to tell me where she had gotten it. This girl had no clue that over half of her paper was plagiarized, and so I began explaining to her how to cite outside works. At the end of the session, I still felt uneasy about whether she could now proceed to cite everything correctly, or if she even knew how to tell whether or not she needed to cite something. After she left, I called her professor and told him

my dilemma. This professor was very pleased that I let him know about this girl's problem. He said that if he noticed any plagiarism at least he would now know that it was done inadvertently.

In addition, to giving me experience with student interaction, working in the Writing Center has also helped to strengthen my content knowledge. For example, because we help people from all disciplines, I have been exposed to the three major style guides: MLA, APA, and Turabian. I have seen various styles and ideas that I can utilize in my own writing. Also, I get to see the different writing assignments and writing prompts that the professors are giving, which provides me with some excellent ideas to use in my future teaching.

I have the opportunity to see which writing assignments or prompts don't work as well. For instance, I can remember one professor giving an assignment that asked the students to pick one of the seven deadly sins and include an example of one of these sins. This professor told me that this prompt did not work because he had a couple of students who objected to writing about sin, and he had a couple

of students who asserted that they had no experience with doing anything wrong. From this mistake, I was able to learn to think about whether the topic of a prompt could be offensive to some people.

Finally, working in the Writing Center has helped me grow professionally. Usually, I work at least one or two hours a day every semester with a professor. This close contact gives me the chance to listen to the professors speak with one another about their teaching and writing ideologies. By working with these professors, I have learned how to agree or disagree politely with my colleagues. I am now much more confident about stating an opinion or asking a question about my chosen career. I have had the opportunity to know the professors more personally by working with them, and the professors that I have worked with have provided me with some behaviors and practices that I can model after in my future classroom.

By working in the Writing Center, I have been able to gradually apply what I have learned in my English and Education classes in my tutorials. When I teach in public school, I will have previous experience with working with student writing. I have heard what the students and the professors have had to say about particular course assignments, projects, and activities. Because many of the Writing Center's clients are freshmen, I feel confident that I know where most high school students' interests lie, and I am comfortable that I know how to critique their work in an encouraging and positive manner. Working in the Writing Center has also enhanced my content knowledge and my professional skills. I cannot think of any better work experience that could have prepared me more for my future career as an educator.

*Buffy Boatwright
Francis Marion University
Florence, SC*

English Tutor's Mantra

I am afraid . . .

**Questions tease my wisdom
My intellect is challenged**

I am afraid . . .

**Insecure knowledge proves false
Lost, leading the blind**

I am afraid . . .

**Ineffective vessel is my mind
Elusive is my helpfulness**

But, unexpectedly . . .

**Answers come easily
Thirst for knowledge is
quenched
Insecurities melt away
Smiles all around
Words fly off the pages**

. . . and, I am a genius

*Jennifer Haagenson, Tutor
Pasadena City College Writing Center
Pasadena, CA*

THE WRITING LAB
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