

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 28, Number 7

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

March, 2004

## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

In this month's newsletter William Broussard and Nahah Rodieck reflect on how we can truly help college athletes become better writers, and B. Cole Bennett describes how his workshops with fellow faculty help them understand what a writing center can offer their students. Lily Mabura, an international student, shares her experiences as a tutor; Sarah Zugschwerdt offers her strategies for helping writers realize their ability to write; and a group who attended the 2003 Summer Institute for Writing Center Directors focuses on the importance of humor to break down barriers. An eclectic, but (I hope) useful, collection of good reading in this issue.

For those who work within learning centers, please note that we have readers who would like to hear from you. How do writing tutors work or interact with other tutors in the center when a student comes in with a project that requires help from both a content tutor and a writing tutor? What is the process by which collaboration involving several tutors and the writer proceeds? If you have insights to share, please consider writing an article for *WLN* (and please see the Web URL, listed on page 2, that explains our guidelines for submission).

• Muriel Harris, editor

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## One for the Gipper (and one for the tutor): On writing center tutorials with college student-athletes

Tutoring, like rhetoric, is an artful science. Trained in the sciences and techniques of education, many tutors are conscientious in applying the psychology and methods they have learned in creative ways. Becoming trustworthy and helpful to most students forces tutors to be flexible, understanding, and often, improvisatory. And we rarely get it right the first time. Only after repetition, some nervous invention, occasional losses of temper, and general frustration do our own abilities as tutors lunge forward. Even still, because of the numbers of students we work with and the perpetually rushed nature of the 15-30 minute workshop, some tutors may wonder if they will ever manage to get it right. Even the best of us will occasionally question whether or not we have succeeded in teaching anyone anything important at all. Additionally, writing teachers and tutors alike are often overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of

students whom we encounter as we help them negotiate their way through challenging lesson plans and as we deal with our own negotiations of political and administrative obligations that are inherent to any calling.

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**Manuscripts:** Recommended length for articles is approximately 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutors' Column essays. If possible, please send as attached files or as cut-and-paste in an e-mail to [wln@purdue.edu](mailto:wln@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 an October issue).

Making matters more challenging is the fact that some of the students with whom we work have additional burdens which may make the most routine writing tutorials difficult to complete or even schedule. Such an example is the collegiate student-athlete. Oft stereotyped as disinterested students and poor writers, even the most dedicated and diligent student-athletes can cause difficulties in tutorial situations because of the fact that they are often pressed for time (when they can schedule meetings) and often precluded from scheduling them because of their many extra-curricular engagements. Beyond this, they are often physically taxed because of practices and competitions, which of course affects one's mental energy and ability to concentrate.

What we mean to suggest here is not that *all* student-athletes are hard-working and diligent students with whom we will side every time over our tutors – this is hardly the case. As is the case with all student bodies, there are lazy, disinterested, uncaring students in every bunch. What we do mean to suggest is that:

- a) There are many cases when hard-working, focused, and talented students (such as student-athletes) are distracted by their lives outside of tutorial sessions. This will inevitably make tutorial sessions more difficult to complete . . . and
- b) In the case of student-athletes, one should not conflate an *apparent* lack of willingness or focus with the denigrating stereotypes that are perpetuated about all student-athletes . . . and finally,
- c) Student-athletes, like all other students, deserve our patience, compassion, flexibility, and most importantly our enthusiasm.

As apparent as these statements are, we feel that they are worth asserting and echoing often, until all members of the academy (students, support staff,

faculty, and administration) are willing to carefully rethink the ways they interact with and treat student-athletes. We fully believe that as people who work with language(s) and understand how language constructs reality, we have a responsibility to be ahead of the curve in terms of treating students of diverse backgrounds and affiliations equitably. As tutors who have worked extensively with student-athletes, we know that our altruism often pays off because our enthusiasm is as motivating and encouraging as apathy and indifference can be destructive and discouraging. Ask any coach and surely s/he will agree wholeheartedly. . . .

### Teachable/Coachable Moments

Before we go further, I (Will) thought it would be useful to frame our discussion with a particularly important story from my own career as a student-athlete at Northwestern State University (Natchitoches, Louisiana).

After a particularly horrible performance in an intrasquad scrimmage, my first college offensive line coach left a note on my locker which read:

*"You'll be a great football player someday if you ever figure out what football is about."*

I wonder if anyone could imagine how much these words disheartened, discouraged, enraged, and embarrassed me. After all, there I was, 18 years old, cocksure and unflappable as a ball player. Yet, as a young man, I was immature, inconsistent, and starving for encouragement, and I always wondered what this statement was supposed to accomplish. Was I supposed to be enraged? Was I supposed to gather that rage and use it constructively? Or was it supposed to knock the chip off of my shoulder? Was it intended to help me "get over myself," as it were, learn to play as a team member, and devote myself to the study of the game as I should? I tried to let the comment slide, but it haunted me all season long.

Meanwhile, as I struggled to adjust to the rigor of my 20+ hour/week

schedule (which included road trips), in addition to the 18 hour course load I had signed up for, I had my problems with college writing, as well. The A's I routinely received in high school on essays became C+'s. In the margins, my teachers scribbled comments such as, "See your handbook," "Unclear thesis," and "Revise." "Revise," I thought, "Are you kidding?" Four years of high school, essay contests, public speaking opportunities, not once did I have to revise anything. Besides, I was an English major and shouldn't be receiving comments like that, I thought. It was the note from my coach all over again; my confidence and desire were turning into anxiety and doubt on and off of the field. And this was just my first month of college . . . I was going to need a lot of help, or else I was going to fall apart and my goals of graduating from college and competing at the college level would crumble.

Funny, but I needed my coach to be more of a teacher and my teacher more of a coach. I needed my coach to take the time to show me what I needed to be doing rather than communicate through parables and cryptic speech, and I wanted my teacher to "get after me" a little bit—motivate me, stir things up, jolt me a bit. In my experience, I've found that the best tutors that have worked with us at the University of Arizona Athletic Department can be both teachers and coaches—providing necessary information and offering valuable skills and shortcuts while having the ability to rile students up, get them excited, and motivate them to engage in meaningful ways with the texts they read and essays they write.

The first time I (Nahal) walked into the office at the athletics department, there sat five football players, one baseball player, one basketball player and a pole vaulter. These young men seemed loud and uncontrollable. I am a small woman who stands only 5'1" tall. The athletes, with their supernatu-

rally broad shoulders, tall and lithe physiques, not to mention their booming voices and emanating body-confidence, overwhelmed and intimidated me. Even as a Muslim woman who is still enraged by the fact that post-9/11 xenophobia in America leads many to pass inquisitive looks my way, I judged them based on information that was available to me about student-athletes. I thought no amount of sweet talking about writing would interest this crowd. My hope was to help them put simple college level papers together if I was lucky (a gross underestimation, in retrospect).

One young man in particular who refused to look at me or talk to me for the first three weeks that I worked at the writing center satellite, walked up to me one day and offered a paper he had written about his childhood. I realized that day that some of the student-athletes were good writers, but perhaps shy about sharing their work. To get around this feeling and help make them all feel like we all had something in common, I began writing and reading to them about my past and childhood. Good or bad, I did not hold back. The results were astonishing. In my first four months working with these amazing young people, I realized that each struggled with a series of issues at home and at school for which writing could be a great outlet. I tried to get them to think of writing as an outlet for emotion and a tool of communication instead of a chore. I later discovered that the shy and quiet young man who was withdrawn from me for three weeks was a gifted poet who contributed many poems to his classes' anthology.

To see an athlete as just an "athlete" is to fail to recognize the potential writer, poet, and creator that lives in that person. Read into this how you may, we mean to say that every tutor on every campus with high-profile athletics teams has an opinion about athletes and the place of athletics in the academy. Never mind that athletics is

central to even classical notions of education (the *gymnasia*, for example), the so-called perversion of college athletics in modern times leads to any number of occasionally apt, occasionally unfair stereotypes about student-athletes. A student-athlete can be a number of things including a great poet, a gifted writer, and a story-teller. We have come to know some amazing athletes whose writing abilities have proven to be nothing short of extraordinary.

At first glance, an athlete such as a football player may seem like a tough young man with a strong body and a stern face. Put yourself in such a situation—a 6'5", 300 lb. man-child steps into your office, sits down, and asks for help. Chances are that immediately, every unfair criticism, every jock joke, every mock-epic jock movie wrought with stereotypes, and all of the local lore about the status of athletics at your college/university is frontloaded, whether consciously or not. Even we tutors are still occasionally guilty of this, even I, Nahal, as a Muslim woman who is used to questioning stares and I, Will, an African-American former student-athlete (lest the reader suppose we are merely finger pointing here). Perhaps what we should trouble ourselves to remember is that there is a person inside the student that just walked into the office—and like other student-athletes, he is burdened with a demanding schedule full of road-trips, long hours of practice, and the expectations of family and friends. And like other students, he may be struggling with his academic load.

Instructors, as understanding as they often are, may not be able to provide all the support needed for students to improve their writing. Clearly, this is one of the reasons writing centers were developed and continue to thrive in myriad institutional settings. Although some student-athletes might struggle with various aspects of writing persuasively and clearly, some others are

strong writers—it is not as if student-athletes are genetically predestined to write poorly (though some of the more hurtful comments we have heard in various settings would suggest this). It is often, as is the case with most students, a question of motivation.

### Tutoring and/as coaching

Many times, coaches are faced with such difficult situations. The hotshot quarterback or point guard comes out of high school and often becomes a fish out of water, or at least a small one in a big pond. And it is the coach's job to hook that "fish": to help that athlete want to develop integral skills and become a team player. This is undoubtedly a question of motivation, as well, so how do coaches accomplish this feat, and in turn, what can tutors do to achieve the same end? Any coach will say that motivation is central to his/her success. A team may be fortunate enough to have superstar talent, but if coaches cannot encourage team-building and motivate players to work toward common goals, then it will be predictably difficult to succeed. Similarly, writing tutors should also rely upon motivation heavily when working with student-athletes. When we work with basic writers who write about literature or write with technology, etc., if they are not motivated to take on assignments and achieve goals, then, at best, they will leave their classes as they came, and at worst, their fear and loathing about writing will be exacerbated. The role of a tutor in the writing center therefore becomes even more critical when working with student-athletes.

If there is one single element that we have found most effective in working with student-athletes and helping them "find the writer" in themselves, it is our genuine enthusiasm. The more enthusiastic and genuine the tutor, more likely, the stronger the bond between the two of them will become. In that sense the tutor is like the coach *and* the

instructor. A tutor plays a critical role in helping the students under his/her charge write, think, and communicate more effectively. By creating a comfort zone in the writing center, the students can come together as a writing group and work together on assignment while benefiting from collaboration and feedback. A group of students who are assigned to a specific tutor can become a writing group and by writing *regularly* in a comfortable setting, the tutor can help them become better writers. (Practice makes perfect, we've all heard a coach say at one point or another.) The key to writing well is writing often. And the key to tutoring effectively is genuine enthusiasm—which, when it becomes contagious, inspires student-athletes to use the work ethic they've developed over years of athletic performance and transfer it to their academics, even when this is easier said than done.

Central to the vocation of tutoring is a desire to help from which our enthusiasm stems. This often involves us in teaching and learning and connecting and talking and telling stories and bringing out emotions and creating laughter while keeping our energy divided equally among all of our clients. If we focus on energizing and motivating student-athletes, devoting as much energy and enthusiasm to the work we do with them as we do with all students, there is an opportunity to bridge the gap between student-athletes and other members of the academy by addressing our conscious and subconscious stereotypes about them.

This is when the work of a tutor resembles the work of a coach. The coach may come down hard on an athlete, but the athlete trusts the coach and his/her guidance. A caring tutor can do the same. Student athletes will shy away from negativity and sarcasm. But if they trust the tutor to have their best interests in mind, they will open up and perform. To help a student-athlete

write better and more effectively does not require a miracle. These young people have much to share. What they need is an ear that can help them focus their writing abilities on various assignments and projects. Just like a coach who does not give up, the tutor should also be persistent. Tutoring requires patience and understanding. Not all student-athletes will view their assignments as easy or rewarding. However, the tutor can re-focus the attention on the positive and help the student find the link between the assignment and maybe a past experience that can shed light on the topic. Each athlete comes into the writing center with a series of expectations. A tutor is there to meet those very expectations and help the student-athlete walk away with a new way to examine the topic and the assignment.

Any tutor can refocus a student's attention to writing in a manner from which they can both benefit. As any coach would do, we as tutors should meet students where they are, instruct, motivate, and empathize when necessary. And the better our students write, and the more they begin to take an interest in their own intellectual development (or, go beyond completing mere tasks to asking important questions about and developing a vocabulary with which to critique their lives, literature, and the world around them) the more pride that we will share in their success.

### Conclusion

Many students who are reluctant at first—the quiet ones, the mean looking ones, the reticent ones—may potentially open up if the right words are aptly spoken and they are valued for the enormous amount of experience and views they have. At the end of one semester, we know how possible it is to go from not knowing a student from Adam to feeling as if we have known them for quite some time. This is the sort of rapport building that we

advocate all tutors develop with their students, even more so, perhaps, when students belong to groups that are typically alienated from, marginalized, or silenced by the institutional machinery of the academy. Our relationships with student-athletes are, in extreme cases, the only favorable interactions that they conduct with members of the academy (this isn't the best case scenario; in fact, it is a scenario we find quite discouraging, but it has occurred in the past). For example, we noticed that attempts to "institute" a writing center within the structure of the study hall program already offered to student-athletes (complete with assigned meetings and assigned groups) flopped. Later, we figured out that we were attempting to replicate the same institutional settings that have traditionally alienated student-athletes. Encouraging student-athletes to work with tutors with whom they were most comfortable and allowing them to do this at their own pace, we were able to achieve more significant tutor-writer relationships and build trust with our clients. Through our continuous revision and consistent motivation, even

the most reluctant students will begin to feel as if they belong in the academy, and furthermore, begin to take their intellectual development as (more) serious(ly) than their athletic development.

Worthy of further review here is that an important part of our commitment to student-athletes should be the profound enthusiasm for helping them grasp new subject matter. Showing compassion while tutoring is not a simple action, especially for those of us who are less familiar with what student-athletes must do on a daily basis. Compassion is the basis for the patience of tutors; no matter how clumsy the students' attempts at grasping the material may be. Rather than being scornful or condescending, we must be tolerant and understanding. In order to learn, the students may experience a series of feelings such as frustration, and regret. That is why they need an ally, and not a judge. Most of our tutors are students who have no previous affiliation with athletics, and our athletics department in particular. That said, we are asking them to do more

than parse sentences with remedial writers—we are asking them to wrestle with ignorance and act accordingly.

All tutoring can be transformative, but, in our particular scenario, unless tutors undergo a personal transformation, little will change in our writing center transactions. In our opinion, learning can be actively constructed, connected to experience, influenced by cultural differences, developed within a social context, and created within a community, as long as the members of that particular community respect one another. Without enthusiasm and a genuine sense of shared goals with our students, whether or not they succeed as writers, we will not have succeeded as tutors. If student-athletes feel that they are genuinely loved and cared for, that they have a voice, and that their tutors are more than willing to hear them, they will be further motivated to perform exceptionally well in all arenas.

*William Broussard with Nahal Rodieck  
Arizona State University  
Tucson, AZ*

## Council of Writing Program Administrators

### 2004 Summer Conference

Newark, DE

#### **Workshop:** July 11-15

Led by Kathi Yancey and Irwin (Bud) Weiser (limited to 25)

#### **Assessment Institute:** July 15

Led by Susanmarie Harrington, Marlene Minor, and Dan Royer

"Practical Assessment: Entrance, Placement, and Transfer"

#### **Conference:** July 15-18

"Re-envisioning Writing Program Administration: Roles, Knowledge, and Authority"

The conference Web site, <<http://www.english.udel.edu/wpa2004/>>, contains information about the workshop, institute, and conference; the call for papers and proposal form; travel arrangements; and other information about WPA. Initial deadline for proposals is March 15; the deadline may be extended after that date. Please visit the Conference Web site for details. Conference chair is Chris Anson: [chris\\_anson@ncsu.edu](mailto:chris_anson@ncsu.edu).

# Retro-training: Using shared history to train tutors and faculty

I want to begin by stating right up front that the thesis of this essay is really pretty simple—in essence, I want to relate my cathartic experiences in faculty training at Abilene Christian University (ACU) and argue that before any real paradigm shift can take place among non-compositionists who want to teach writing more effectively, writing center directors must deliver, in essence, a rhetorical and somewhat gymnastic history lesson. My hope is that readers will empathize with my position and narratives and extract useful tips from what I do at ACU for their own purposes.

Early and ongoing writing center literature often laments our frustration with the haphazard success and frequent failure associated with describing our philosophies and practices to the rest of our colleagues. I am thinking especially of mid-1980s articles such as Mickey Harris's "What's Up and What's In: Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers" or "Solutions and Trade-Offs in Writing Center Administration," and Gary Olson and Evelyn Ashton-Jones's "Writing Center Directors: The Search for Professional Status," as well as Stephen North's infamous "The Idea of a Writing Center." I have identified with these authors much more since leaving graduate school and beginning my own center than I ever could have as a tutor, for I now have concrete experience to add to my abstract generalizations. My purpose here is to discuss how I have worked at my own institution to overcome these frustrations.

I use the word "training" quite purposefully to describe what I do with my fellow faculty members and with the same gusto that I use the word for new tutors. The writing center I direct is only in its third year; I have found

that much of my time is spent explaining to faculty members what we do and, just as often, what we don't do. It's really the position all directors of new centers find ourselves in: the role of campus educators, media respondents, and, dare I say, publicists. When I worked as a tutor during graduate school, I went to classes with flyers and gave ten-minute talks on our services like all other tutors, but I had no idea what new frontiers awaited me as director of a new center. See if any of my experiences are familiar to you.

As I go about teaching my composition classes and working at the writing center, I frequently cross paths with faculty members whom I have not yet met. They recognize me as being a relative newbie and will smile and say something like, "Oh, hey, you're in the English department, aren't you? I saw you in a faculty meeting the other week."

"Yes," I say, "I teach composition, and I direct the Writing Center."

"Oh, that's really great," they reply, smiling vigorously; "The Writing Center." A few seconds pass. "Now, what is that?"

At this point, I will plunge into rich, colorful explanations of what I do, referring them to our web site and, if I am so equipped, supplying them with a flyer or bookmark so they can have a souvenir of our conversation together. "We make better writers as we make better papers, blah blah blah, macro concerns before micro, blah blah blah." Most directors and many tutors have had similar experiences; this is what we all do. But I end these conversations by asking them to attend an ACU-specific faculty development session that I give on a regular rotation

entitled, cleverly, "How to Respond to Student Writing." ACU has a facility called the *Center for Teaching Excellence* that lines up such sessions for the asking, and even provides lunch for all participants—a nice and lucky analogue to what I see on the WCenter listserv discussed as "brown bag luncheon forums." I began facilitating these informal meetings the first semester I arrived, intending to smartly disguise a commercial for the Writing Center around a bull session where I could talk about writing process and answer questions. The direction these development sessions has taken is the real meat of this essay.

My design for faculty development manifested within a context of genuine ignorance among my colleagues. The Writing Center was brand new; most of the ACU faculty, including my Literature-trained English partners, did not understand its real purpose for existence. Those who have begun new centers know exactly what I mean. I had endured lengthy conversations with colleagues on why spending most of our resources on diagnostic instruments is not the best idea. "But how will you know how to correct their deficiencies?" they had asked. Once, I remember bumping into a theology professor away from campus who said, "Oh, yes, I know who you are; I plan to come to one of your sessions on 'How to Mark up Papers.'" Similar misunderstandings of the Writing Center's purpose emerged the first time I delivered the faculty development session. Before I began, I asked participants to write down any questions on 3x5 cards and I would try to attend to them during and after my scripted presentation. These questions centered around how to better and more quickly make sentence-level editing notes, how to efficiently grade pa-

pers and remain sane, and the like—not how to better respond to student writing, which was my purpose.

Now, let me back up just a bit and explain how I had conceived this “lecture” in the first place: I had a total of 45-minutes to talk about the subject of faculty response to student writing, and frankly, after giving so many 10-minute in-class writing center orientation speeches, was a little leery of potentially droning on about our services. I knew my audience was going to be a conglomerate of disparate professors from all over the academy, most of whom had never heard of a writing center or even a smidgen of composition theory. So, given that my purpose was to discuss the writing center within the context of writing process theory, I decided as a default to begin with one of the most interesting things I learned in graduate school—the history of the composition discipline. I picked these three bullet points:

- 1874: Harvard University’s “English A.”
- 1920-1930: Communications Departments’ aggregate secession
- 1966: Dartmouth Conference

I begin by discussing the purpose of an education in rhetoric before 1800—how it was almost exclusively grounded in speech and limited to the purposes of sermons, political diatribes, and epideictic orations. From that brief introduction, I move on to the goings on at Harvard in 1874, particularly highlighting their introduction of a written English portion of the entrance exam, the subjects of which were based on literature studies of privileged, formal education. I then detail the consequences of such modification of the exam very carefully, describing how all other ivy leagues followed suit and—specifically—that non-English speakers, farmers, and working class applicants were effectively excluded from admission to higher education. However, the biggest surprise, as many of you know, was that many of the applicants from the

upper-class prep schools that normally fed Harvard’s admissions process failed the written exam as well.

The consequences of what followed for the teaching of writing were drastic: Harvard invented English A, the first freshman composition course, and within 23 years, it was the only required course in the curriculum. Focus of writing instruction shifted radically, moving from an age-old emphasis on rhetoric—that is, on the effect of discourse on an audience—to correct forms. This emphasis remained until 1966, when the proceedings from the Dartmouth Conference began to challenge form-based writing, or what is commonly referred to as the “current-traditional paradigm,” and process theory began to take shape.

This hasty recapitulation of composition history in the United States is, I realize, rather reductive. During my presentation, I also mention how the people who really wanted to continue studying rhetoric proper split off and became the Communication Department, especially if there are representatives of this faculty in the room. My point in covering such historical ground is that doing so makes my audience much more receptive to my ultimate goals of changing the way they create assignments and grade writing. During the few instances that I have begun consulting with professors about their writing assignments outside of this context, recommending that they allow revision, see writing as a process that requires time, multiple drafts, etc., I have been met with folded arms and stone expressions that loudly state, “Grammar worksheets were good enough for my dad, they were good enough for me, and they should have sufficed for your students in your English class—not mine.”

In sharp contrast, however, the development sessions I am describing here are continually met with a much different response as a result of my spending so much time outlining the

history of the academy that everyone in the room shares. Virtually every faculty member respects rhetoric and its ancient history of purposeful communication; what they don’t understand is its iron-clad connection with writing instruction. My purpose is to make that connection known so explicitly that this faculty audience will be willing to listen to my later suggestions, such as the moving of sentence-level concerns to the bottom of the list of responses they give back to students and allowing peer-review class periods and multiple revisions. My fellow professors are much more inclined to hear and follow this advice when it’s couched in a poignant historical context; for instance, when they think of the late 19th-century Italian immigrant or post Civil-War soldier who was denied admission to college just because he didn’t know how to write about Shakespeare.

When my mini-lecture moves to the Dartmouth conference, then, assertions of the writing process as a paradigm shift don’t seem as tenuous to people who have never heard of these things. When I outline the late 1960s disagreements between the British and American scholars regarding the proper function and purpose of college English instruction, detailed by Joseph Harris, Jim Berlin, and others, the shift to emphases in growth, voice, and process theories appears natural and appropriate. My next training directives include discussing the writing process steps at length, advocating peer-review class periods, and finally showing actual power-point reproductions of comments I have made on student papers.

Approaching my colleagues with this historical narrative introduction seems, in my experience anyway, considerably more effective than referring them to published research on the topic at hand, such as, for example, Chapters One and Two of Constance Weaver’s *Teaching Grammar in Context* or Donald Murray’s “Teach Writing as Process not Product,” or Joseph Will-

iams' "The Phenomenology of Error." Though I will not endeavor to pursue this digression deeply, I believe the difference can be best explained in Burkean terms: while such books and articles are much more eloquent than I am at making the argument for responding productively to student texts, they are "other." These writers are compositionists who publish in a field outside the ones represented by faculty sitting in the room with me at these development sessions. However, the history I summarize during this presentation is *ours*; it's mine and it's yours and it's everyone's who teaches anywhere in the American college system, including the people in that room with me. I am constructing my *ethos* through *identification* with my audience in such a way as to persuade them effectively to my ideas of writing pedagogy. After all, I am a product of the same history of all other faculty who assemble to hear me talk about writing; together we scoff at old, curmudgeonly gatekeepers of the late 1800s for creating such a elitist testing component; together we empathize with the Communication department for seceding to continue studying proper rhetoric; and together—my hope re-

mains—we see the need to respond to student writing in ways that restore macro rhetorical issues over micro concerns. Along the way, I also hope we agree that the Writing Center is tremendously important to such processes.

Just two quick closing points and I'm finished: first, far and away the most common feedback I get from faculty who attend my development session is some form of praise for the historical recap. I was so taken aback by this at first that I thought it was a fluke, but I began adding points here and there and slowing things down a bit for later presentations; compliments for this material continued to flow, and I continued to monitor positive crowd response each time. In short, I realized that this introductory history segment could very well be the most interesting part of my faculty presentation.

Second, last fall ACU finally agreed to put a bona-fide Comp theory/tutor training course on the books, wherein I get to teach first-semester graduate students while they learn about writing theory and tutoring praxes. Perhaps

you can guess where I begin on day one. Though I am much more comprehensive and start much earlier in history, I return to the broad overview of the history of rhetorical instruction and how it jumped the track in Cambridge in 1874 to move to form-based writing instruction. Again, these graduate students I teach recognize their place in this history, identifying through former K-12 student experiences they've had, along with cultural responses, such as uncritical embraces of literacy crisis arguments throughout the past ten years. Together, like my faculty colleagues and I, we unpack our history to more effectively prepare ourselves to improve writing and writing instruction on our campus.

B. Cole Bennett  
Abilene Christian University  
Abilene, TX

### Works Cited

- Harris, Muriel. "What's Up and What's In: Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers" *Writing Center Journal* 11.1 (1990): 15-25.  
- - - "Solutions and Trade-Offs in Writing Center Administration," *Writing Center Journal* 12.1 (1991): 63-79.

(continued on page 11)

## Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

March 6, 2004: Northern California Writing Center Association, in Stanford, CA  
**Contact** John Tinker: jtinker@stanford.edu;  
Conference Web site: <<http://nwca.stanford.edu>>.

April 2-3, 2003: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Greensburg, PA  
**Contact:** Conference Web site: <[http://maura.setonhill.edu/~wc\\_conf04/ecwca.html](http://maura.setonhill.edu/~wc_conf04/ecwca.html)>.

April 17, 2004: Northeast Writing Centers Association, in North Andover, MA  
**Contact:** Kathleen Shine Cain, Merrimack College, North Andover, MA. E-mail: Kathleen.Cain@merrimack.edu; Conference web site: <<http://merrimack.edu/newca>>.

April 17, 2004: Pacific Northwest Writing Centers Association, in Centralia, WA

**Contact:** Linda Foss: lfoss@Centralia.edu. Web site: <<http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~writepro/PNWCA.htm>>.

April 24, 2004: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Dundalk, MD  
**Contact:** Brenda Stevens Fick, Student Success Center, CCBC Dundalk, 7200 Sollers Point Rd., Baltimore, MD 21222. Phone: 410-285-9877. Online Submissions: bfick@ccbcmd.edu

November 4-6, 2004: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Cloud, MN  
**Contact:** Frankie Condon, Department of English, 720 Fourth Avenue South, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498. Web site: <<http://www.ku.edu/~mwca/>>.

October 19-23, 2005: International Writing Centers Association, in Minneapolis, MN



# TUTORS' COLUMN

## An international student tutoring at the writing center

From the very beginning, I felt like an interloper, the proverbial carpetbagger, only from East Africa. Thank goodness nobody actually insinuated I was one. I have generally felt welcome since my arrival at the University of Idaho's Writing Center as a peer writing tutor, but I have had several people asking me "where I learnt my English." Why, I say, the English invaded us and after a several years of very uncivilized negotiations, during which we had to learn English to effectively argue with them, they fumed away with the word "safari" in their Oxford dictionaries.

Then came the American English nonnegotiable invasion via mass media and globalization. So, you see, asking me "where I learnt my English" means I get to take a little time to answer your question. This is because my East African English is an alloy of sorts.

Being an alloy of sorts does not make it any easier tutoring at the Writing Center or being an English graduate student. My alloy "foreignness" shows. I say "full stop" when helping my peer student writers with their punctuation before I stop like a fool at the blank look on their faces to hurriedly say "period." Yes, I have made certain concessions. But I will absolutely not commend you on your nice "pants," no sir! Nice "trousers," I will insist, even to Americans, because saying the former at home will have people embarrassingly checking the state of their flies.

So, even if I am a tutor at the Writing Center, I commiserate with all the for-

eign students who come there for help with their writing. I can honestly say that the Writing Center is the most diverse of places on campus. In my five months here, I have tutored student writers from Sweden, Germany, Norway, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Korea, Japan, China and Mexico. Their "foreignness," like mine, creeps into their writing, so that at one time or another we have all exhibited that dour face, which reminds me of Shel Silverstein's poem "Peckin":

The saddest thing I ever did see  
Was a woodpecker peckin' at a  
plastic tree.  
He looked at me, and "Friend,"  
says he,  
"Things ain't as sweet as they used  
to be." (Silverstein 83)

Nothing could be truer. Many foreign writing students here are like Silverstein's poor woodpecker pecking at the new unfathomable tree of the American academia. Obviously, writing "ain't as sweet as it used to be." For many of these students, who are actually quite proficient and intelligible in their own languages, writing has turned into an arduous task that can only be surmounted with patience and time.

During our Internship in Tutoring Writing class, one of my fellow tutors, Deborah, recounted an incident at the Writing Center where she literally made one ESL student writer's dream come true. This writer had dreamt of opening a dictionary and not finding words with their meanings next to them but words and their synonyms. When Deborah handed her a thesaurus,

she could not believe her eyes. It was a dream come true!

Please do not laugh. Such, at times, is the desperation of foreign students who could dream their problems away if they could. It is the same desperation I felt when I realized that my British citation method was not acceptable in the American literary school. Even though all my instructors were very understanding about this and did not mark me down in my papers for it, I felt I was out on a limb. Being part of the Internees at the Writing Center, who were supposed to be helping student writers, did not help matters. It would not do, I knew, to be clueless.

So I learnt the MLA Citation Method the way one learns a crash course: in a tearing hurry. Then I thought I had gotten it and went ahead in a tutoring session to suggest "proper" MLA research-paper format to one of my student writers at the Writing Center. As a matter of cosmetics, I told her that she should justify her margins so that her work could look neater, only to have my instructor kindly point out to me later that the MLA Handbook in page 104 says that "you should not justify on the right margin."

The gist of the matter is, as a tutor, especially an international tutor, one has to learn to swallow crow. Eat lots of humble pie readily, I will say to any international tutor that it is good for the general well-being of your body. So these five past months at the Writing Center I have been eating lots of humble pie; learning as well as tutoring.

Despite all the crow-eating and my failings as a tutor, I have still managed to have major concerns about the position of foreign international students and their ability to write. While acknowledging their problems and my own, I have learnt to advocate for the treatment of each student as an individual because not all can be assumed to have traditional ESL problems. There is nothing as bad in a writing center, I believe, as stereotyping all foreigners as poor English writers when this is not always the case.

But when all is said and done, we cannot ignore the fact that a significant number of foreign students face this problem. And not only in writing, but also in reading where they are prone to making unconventional readings.

In an online discussion, our training course instructor asked what reason we tutoring interns would give as to why certain students, like international students, might be placed a remedial class. My reply to that was that such students might have totally different answers from those expected from “socialized” English students who are products of the American academy. Low grades might stem from such (unconventional readings) consequently placing otherwise capable students in remedial classes.

Other foreign students might find themselves under the remedial umbrella because they cannot effectively communicate in English rather than because of their intellectual abilities, which could probably be astoundingly put across in their native language.

Categorizing foreign students into the remedial category might be useful when looking for generally studied and approved ways of dealing with their problems. Take the example of ESL teaching techniques. Certain tutoring procedures have been researched, tested and found to be working and, indeed, useful. But as I have said before, one should be cautious about applying generalizations as each foreign student is an individual.

How does all this affect our position as tutors? I think being aware of the seemingly inevitable “socialization” of international students puts tutors in a dilemma. They are caught between turning the student into a conventional reader and letting him/her be with their specific social-cultural and social-historical backgrounds. To survive the American academic system they have to be rearranged, and yet it is this very rearrangement that robs the system of its claim of accommodating different views or interpretation of its many texts.

Being an international tutor myself puts me in an even greater dilemma. I feel increasingly “socialized” and with nothing to say or do about it. When a friend from home called me recently, she asked: “What has happened to your voice? You sound like an American.”

“Oh, God, no,” I said. “It must be the phone thing. . . . we’re thousands of miles apart. Maybe the static.”

But all the while, I was staring at the open page of my favorite poet Silverstein and reading:

They’ve put a brassiere on the camel,  
They claim she’s more decent this way.  
They’ve put a brassiere on the camel,  
The camel had nothing to say.  
They squeezed her into it, I’ll never know how. (166).

But at the Writing Center the following day, I was tutoring a writing student and he said “pardon?” Suddenly I was so happy that I smiled. The brassiere is a good old removable brassiere, I suppose. And so I proceed, lighter at heart; with the murmur of other tutoring sessions all around me; with the possibility of a young mother’s baby—carried along for a session because there was no one to baby-sit it, breaking into cries; with Japanese writing all over the white board; with a hand now and then dipping into our famous candy jar.

The writing center, in many ways, is home away from home for many foreign students. It is a place for encouragement, and a writing shoulder to cry on. My instructor has always said a university cannot hope to increase diversity without setting up an adequate support system. The writing center is a crucial part of that support system. It helps international students and tutors alike, to wear that brassiere with a smile.

Lily Mabura  
2002-2003 AAUW International Fellow  
University of Idaho  
Moscow, ID

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Silverstein, Shel. *A Light in the Attic*.  
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## Following the yellow brick road

We’re off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of . . . the Writing Center? Yes, that’s right. Wilson library 389 is the Emerald City and

when writers enter its door, I become the wonderful Wizard, able to wave my wand and magically transform ordinary, ugly old papers into Pulitzer

prizewinners. Hear the thunder. See the lightning! “We’re a long way from home now, Toto,” nervous writers think to themselves, and from behind

my shroud I agree with another deep rumble before welcoming writers in a loud booming voice, “**Why are you here?**”

“We came to get a heart, some courage, and a brain,” they answer. In no uncertain terms, this is exactly what writers are looking for when they meet me as a learning assistant—a wizard who can not only transform their papers, but restore their heart and give them courage to face the blank page and write. And in twenty-five or fifty minutes, this wizard has tried to do both.

Yet while I may have desired to stay behind the glitzy curtain of impressing writers with all my rumblings, loud and booming voices, one question about misplaced modifiers is enough to tear down the veil and expose me for who I am: just another student, like themselves, who struggles to coherently express herself on paper. So with the curtain destroyed, what can I offer writers? I have discovered that it’s not magic that will do the trick, but rather selecting the right gift for writers that will first transform them as writers, and ultimately their papers. My growing pedagogy reflects this realization.

In the story the *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion and the Scarecrow all ask the Wizard for abstract items: home, heart, courage, and a brain, but the Wizard gives them concrete items instead, such as a medal of honor for courage and a diploma for a brain. *With each gift there comes a sudden consciousness of the character’s potential for being what they desired*: the Cowardly Lion lifts his head, and his canter all at once becomes that of a soldier while the Scarecrow abruptly begins to spout off mathematical formulas. At last the sojourners recognize that the Wizard’s magic was not found in him, but in themselves all along. Now leaving the Emerald City and the magical Wizard isn’t so tough to do.

Likewise, writers come to the Writing Center wizards for abstract items: help with ideas or their paper’s flow, but rather than send them away with everything magically “fixed,” so I too need to present concrete gifts according to their needs so that writers can realize *their* potential for becoming articulate writers, potential that was indeed always within them. Then their next paper won’t seem too insurmountable nor they too incompetent to undertake it.

It might look something like this: Recently, I conferenced with an English 101 student who had only a vague concept of transitions; she knew they helped “transition” her paper and that she needed them, but she had no idea as to how they functioned. For her, transitions in her paper were just as abstract as “courage” was to the Lion. My challenge was to make this abstract concept concrete for her, so that in future she would be able understand and write beautiful transitions. But how?

Before I knew it, I was drawing a picture for her, a sort of visual analogy. It consisted of two circles that overlapped a little at their edges. In one circle I put the word “blue” and in the other, “yellow;” the overlapping part I colored in and labeled “green.” I then explained how in a paper where one point, “blue,” concludes and another, “yellow,” begins, there must be some “green,” or transition room, to connect the two points and preserve the flow of the paper. This visual representation of a transition, the abstract concept made concrete, was my gift to this writer that will allow her to realize her own potential ability to not only write transitions well, but to write every part of her paper well. I’m confident that she will use this gift until she internalizes it and no longer needs its representation nor me to explain it; she will then have become the writer that this “wizard” knew she could be all along.

When I began working at the Writing Center, I knew that I wouldn’t be a wizard at coaching writing, but I still tried. The truth, I found, is not in transforming the awful to awesome and maintaining the deference and distance of a writing wizard, but rather in tearing down the curtain, revealing my real self, and giving that right gift to writers that will enable them to become confident and eventually triumphant in the face of writing assignments. Success does come when writers realize that, like Dorothy, they had the power to write well all along. Then they can leave saying, “There’s no place like the Writing Center! There’s no place like the Writing Center! There’s no place like the Writing Center!”

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Bellingham, WA

## Call For Papers

*The WAC Journal* seeks submissions from writing center personnel of papers that explore the question of what kinds of writing assignments encourage the most and best learning.

The audience of the journal is primarily faculty members who assign writing to students. Deadline: March 1, 2005. For more information < <http://wac.colostate.edu/journal/> >.

## Retro-Training

(cont. from page 8)

- North, Stephen. “The Idea of a Writing Center.” *College English* 46 (1984): 433-46.
- Olson, Gary, and Evelyn Ashton-Jones. “Writing Center Directors: The Search for Professional Statue.” *WPA* 12.1-2 (1988): 19-28.

## 2004 Summer Institute for Writing Center Directors and Professionals

We are pleased to announce that registration is now available for the 2004 Summer Institute for Writing Center Directors and Professionals. The second annual Summer Institute will be held on the campus of Clark University in Worcester, MA, from July 11 to 16, 2004.

Co-sponsored by Clark, Marquette University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the International Writing Centers Association, the Summer Institute offers new writing center directors (and established directors starting a new program or interested in new ideas) at all instructional levels the chance to spend a week with leaders in the field discussing and learning about topics essential to writing center work.

The co-hosts of the 2004 Summer Institute are Paula Gillespie (Marquette University), Anne Ellen Geller

(Clark University), and Neal Lerner (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Leaders are Michele Eodice (University of Kansas), Dawn Fels (University City High School in St. Louis), Carol Peterson Haviland (Cal. State San Bernardino), Harvey Kail (University of Maine), Howard Tinberg (Bristol Community College in Fall River, MA), and Jill Pennington (Lansing Community College).

The Summer Institute registration fee is \$499 and is limited to 40 participants. For more information, go to <http://www.clarku.edu/writing/iwca/index.shtml> or email Anne Ellen Geller ([angeller@clarku.edu](mailto:angeller@clarku.edu)) or Paula Gillespie ([paula.gillespie@marquette.edu](mailto:paula.gillespie@marquette.edu)) or Neal Lerner ([nlerner@mit.edu](mailto:nlerner@mit.edu)).

## Director, Writing Center University of Oklahoma

The University of Oklahoma seeks to appoint a director for its OU Writing Center to begin as early as July 1, 2004; this position will be a staff position with the possibility of an adjunct faculty appointment within the appropriate academic department.

The OU Writing Center is an autonomous unit reporting directly to the Senior Vice President & Provost; the Director collaborates closely with both the Director of the First-Year Composition Program (administered within the Department of English) and the Director of the Expository Writing Program (Provost direct). The Director trains and supervises a staff of writing consultants; the Director also develops and delivers various tutorial programs to meet the diverse needs of our student population. The University is interested in enhancing its writing curriculum and its support services for students.

Applicants must hold a Ph.D. in Composition and Rhetoric or a related field and must have

some prior experience with a writing center and/or a program in writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC). Additional preferred qualifications include administrative experience within writing centers, experience in administering WAC programs, prior college-level teaching experience, and a record of publication in Composition and Rhetoric.

Applicants should direct a letter, a vita, a personal statement of their philosophy pertaining to providing writing assistance to students, and a list of references to:

Dr. David Long, Director of Expository Writing  
Chair, search committee for Director of Writing Center  
4 Bizzell Library  
University of Oklahoma  
Norman, Oklahoma 73019  
[dl@ou.edu](mailto:dl@ou.edu)

Screening will begin immediately and interviews may be held at CCCC, so applicants can contact Dr. Long even at the last minute, if necessary. The search will remain open until the position is filled. The University of Oklahoma is an Equal Opportunity-Affirmative Action employer.

# Connecting through humor: Collaboration at the summer institute

*From July 27 to August 1, 2003, forty writing center directors and professionals joined co-chairs Brad Hughes and Paula Gillespie in Madison, Wisconsin for the 2003 Writing Center Summer Institute (<[www.wisc.edu/writing/institute](http://www.wisc.edu/writing/institute)>). The Institute was held at the University of Wisconsin on beautiful Lake Mendota. The following article begins with a song written by a group of Institute participants, in response to a writing assignment given by co-chair Paula Gillespie, on the first day of the Institute, before an afternoon boat ride.*

Do not adjust your glasses or the lighting in your office. What you are about to read is real. No, you have not picked up *Mad* (or *The Onion*). No, crazed and disgruntled staffers of the Purdue OWL have not taken over the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. We devote this song to our many writing center friends and colleagues who could not be at the 2003 Writing Center Summer Institute in Madison, and we do so in the innocent spirit of laughter and the much-deserved break we all need from the difficult (yet rewarding) work we do in our writing centers! As you will see, this song represents camaraderie and collaboration of a few silly writing center professionals (or not) who came together one warm evening on beautiful Lake Mendota.

## Draft after Draft

*(based loosely on the music of Hank Williams's "Jambalaya")*

Paula will cry 'cause we modified  
her assignment.  
Many others went right home to  
write it.  
Brad, you'll be sad we defied it.

Son of a gun we're having fun as  
we write it.

Paula said we should emulate our  
students,  
So we went right to the bar to  
produce it.  
Our resources included beers and  
shooters.  
Son of a gun we had big fun—  
Thank God for tutors!!

We brainstormed with Fred and  
Ted and Leroy;  
Then we freewrote all night long  
with the frat boys.  
We drank draft after draft as we  
drafted.  
Son of a gun we had big fun as  
we crafted.

Our mission and our model are  
subversive;  
The process of our writing is  
discursive.  
Collaboration was enhanced by  
happy hour;  
Son of a gun we had great fun  
with whisky sours.

We really need your input 'cause  
we blew it.  
This assignment's due today, so  
get right to it.  
We're hung over and so tired, so  
just fix it!  
Son of a gun we had good fun  
. . . at . . . this . . . Institute.

We love our writing center work, and especially our students, but we also found it fun to play with some stereotypes associated with writing center work. Those stereotypes allowed us to connect for an evening of laughter, which we believe we all need. Like Pam Childers, who claims that "laughter is an integral part of a writing cen-

ter" because it helps to create a "warm accepting environment" that encourages writers to share (5), we too believe laughter is invaluable, both in our personal relationships and in those we establish in the writing center. Humor theorists have long promoted laughter as a positive force. For example, Jo Ann Griffin suggests that humor allows students to approach new experiences from "a position of safety, familiarity, and comfort" (88). Griffin positions the space created by humor as "stealing the moment," her label for a space or opening that promotes possibilities for change through social dialogue (94). Other theorists make similar claims. Gregg Camfield claims that humor provides for a momentary freedom from stress and focused moment-to-moment decision making, easing discomforts or tensions in complex cultural and social situations. According to Camfield, humor opens positive cognitive possibilities, providing for new ways of thinking, even creating new neural pathways—open spaces for learning. Our experience at the Summer Institute in Madison reminded us of the many positive possibilities for humor. We experienced creativity, camaraderie, and learning that certainly was more conducive because of—if not made possible by—our propensity toward humor.

Writing center work can be very lonely and isolated on some campuses because, very often, the writing center director is the only writing center professional on campus. We spend much of our working lives explaining things, like what we do, how we do it, and why we do what we do. And we explain things to different audiences. For instance, students want to know why they can't drop off their rough drafts and pick up the fixed final versions in

an hour or two. Faculty want to know how a paper made it through the writing center yet still had errors when the student turned it in. Tutors want to know how to read and comment on a twenty-page paper in a half-hour. So we explain: we don't work on papers without the writers (Sure you do—that's what online conferencing is for! Ahhh . . . the topic of another article perhaps?); we don't "fix" the papers for the students; and we don't need to read an entire paper to have a successful conference with a student. Now that's a lot of don'ts, which can be distressing because the don'ts take the focus off of the many wonderful things that we do . . . um, do . . . which, again, we have to explain because most people don't know what we do . . . do.

The Institute leaders understood this so well that the first afternoon of the Institute they put us all on a boat in the middle of a lake and said "socialize—that is, before you go back to your hotel rooms and do your homework." Some of us are not the mingling type, so for us the humor that our group enjoyed provided the very momentary freedom from stress, discomfort, and tension of which Camfield speaks. We were still in the icebreaker stage of the Institute and had been collectively saddled with "homework," which would involve more collaborative activity of the get-to-know-one-another variety. We knew we would enjoy the company of this group of like-minded professionals. In fact, it's the kind of forum that we crave. Even so, some of us don't like small talk; we feel uncomfortable talking about ourselves; and we resist anything that resembles an icebreaking moment. Perhaps that's why at the end of Day One we (all six of us) promptly positioned ourselves near the surest signs of comfort on the Blues Cruise—food and drink. We found the day's activities invigorating and thought provoking, but the fact remained that we were all still on the uncomfortable side of togetherness—new, awkward, and polite. So, as we

were wondering how we would make it through two hours of this, we dutifully exchanged niceties, of course, but soon, through our shared resistance to these kinds of exchanges, the tone, mood, and content of our conversation made a shift for the better. The six of us talked about Hank Williams and good music as we noshed on afternoon treats, lamenting about impending homework. That's when the idea struck. We would collaborate, one of the wonderful things that we do . . . do, craft a writing center song, set it to Hank Williams's music, and use it for our collective homework assignment (another wonderful thing that we do . . . do, three jobs at once—it's the only way we get all the work done). And we would make it funny because we all needed to laugh (we had, remember, spent the past year explaining).

And by the end of the cruise, rather than embracing the opportunity to go our separate ways, we had made plans to relocate to write our version of Paula's "assignment." Many laughs later, we had erased the feelings of tension that come at the front side of such social situations as the Summer Institute. And we accomplished that neither by spilling personal stories nor by playing introductory games. We did it by making light of ourselves and our profession and thereby focusing our icebreaking energy on what we hoped would lighten the mood for everyone at the Institute the next day. In other words, through humor we enjoyed that momentary freedom from discomfort and wanted to share the feeling with the larger group.

Most of us had not known a soul at the Institute, but we found collaborators (conspirators?) on that boat who became soul mates by the end of the evening. It was great, rejuvenating, to talk and laugh and drink and laugh and write and laugh with people who understand the issues we face, without having to explain what we do . . . do.

The song is funny, not because it captures what we don't do or because of its irreverent treatment of certain kinds of individuals (no names, please, though we did go to a local pub to draft the song), but because as we wrote it, we didn't have to explain what we do . . . do so wonderfully well. The humor helped us connect in a way that all the explaining in the world couldn't make clear. We laughed so hard the muscles in our faces ached. We were so loud that the woman at the bar even knew our song—and praised it!!

And this sort of comic relief was just what we needed because many . . . all right, most. . . Oh, all right, ALL of the topics we explored during the Summer Institute were serious ones and several were downright daunting for some participants. As directors and professionals in writing centers, we all know that what we do do in the way of administration and teaching is overwhelming much of the time. Yet we march on; we push through the red tape by subversion or sheer will; we tackle what is placed before us and reach for what is placed beside, or behind us; we persevere in the face of budget cuts and misunderstanding. What gets us through is attitude and a perception of academics and the academy that allows us to see with smiling if not always open eyes. What most sticks with us about the Writing Center Institute are the laughs—the laughs about virtually everything.

To narrow it down to one funny moment as representative of the Summer Writing Center Institute would be extremely hard for us. Many of us hate the "What is your favorite . . .?" question. We can never decide on a favorite movie, book, author, composer, food, place, etc. Something very central to our cerebral cortex prevents us from making those kinds of decisions. We connect with the overall karma of a place or situation, so we don't have a one funny moment to offer. What we learned about using humor in our writ-

ing centers is far more general than that. Subtle, pervasive, and consistent humor (of course not in every situation) offers an environment for workers and student writers to feel relaxed and wanted. When you laugh WITH people, they feel included and valuable. These are rightfully important considerations for a writing center director, but more importantly, we believe laughter is indispensable for writing center directors themselves.

In much the same way, writing center personnel might find ways to relieve our students of that discomfort that looms as they approach the writing center, particularly for the first time. In most cases, students are far from sure that they will ever come to enjoy the company of the folks in the writing center. Instead, at the start, they're often timid, shy, embarrassed, perhaps even angry to be in our midst—or simply resistant as we all felt about Paula's assignment. The cultural and social context of a writing center consultation puts these students in a position of proximity that almost guarantees a certain level of tension, even caution. Thus, as Camfield suggests, we in the writing center essentially need to employ humor as a means to a more comfortable and open space for learning. It places the focus elsewhere, if even momentarily, but long enough to afford us a certain kind of freedom from anxiety. As with our group at the Institute, shared humor creates possibilities that simply would not exist without it.

Still, while collaborating on this article, it became rapidly apparent that what the six of us considered "cute," "funny," and "appropriate" to share with other Summer Institute attendees might not be as well accepted by a broader audience. In our attempt to share humor with individuals of like minds, we felt empowered to poke fun at writing, writing centers, tutors, writers, writing center directors, Institute leaders, and ourselves. In retrospect,

we have discussed at length whether to share the little ditty we produced with an audience excluded from the Institute's safe environment and positive context. This situation is exemplary of the binary nature inherent in humor. It works to eliminate barriers for some while building them for others. As part of the collaboration, we each had the opportunity to bond with and enjoy five other attendees on a more intimate basis than we enjoyed with the remainder of the group. At the same time, this opportunity could be perceived as a vehicle that barred others from being part of our "group," while keeping us from being included in others. This type of dualistic conundrum is the problem intrinsic in humor. While it is vitally important that the individuals who compose our writing centers share bonding opportunities, most likely including quite a bit of humor, we must be aware that our writing center family needs to reach outside its exclusive nature and make writing center users feel welcome. Whether or not humor is the vehicle through which we reach this warm, welcoming atmosphere is determined by subtle factors unique to each situation that we cannot even hope to cover here.

Anecdotal experiences shared in this article demonstrate that humor can alleviate barriers and lead to intimate bonding and acceptance, especially in situations where people have become attached to and support like theories and principles. However, it also suggests that there may be inherent danger when attempting to transfer humor outside a safe and like-minded environment such as we experienced first in singing the song for the group and then in attempting to write this article. When it became apparent that some members of our group really DID intend to sing the song the next day at the Summer Institute, this danger became a reality. Thus, we geared our revising efforts (which continued quite literally up until the moment of delivery) toward humor fit for the occasion

(case in point—thank God for tutors! You may guess at the original line). So we were relieved when one of the Institute co-chairs remarked, "It was one of the best icebreakers I've ever experienced. Hilarious." As another institute leader mentioned, "It brought everyone in the Institute closer through references to common experiences." We hope our attempts in this light-hearted article to contextualize our shared experience at the Institute for a wider audience have been equally successful. When used appropriately, humor might provide a similar means for relieving tension and offering inclusion in our writing centers.

In the final analysis, the six of us continue to enjoy the bond we created through our raucous laughter, even as we collaborate on this article, and we wish for all writing center folk the joy of humor and side-splitting laughter we have found so rewarding. Cheers! And, oh, by the way, do you know how many writing center professionals it takes to write an article?

- Kelli Grady, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY;
- Carol Mattingly, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY;
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professor's note that the essay was written by the student. Please send three copies of the manuscript without author's name on the manuscript. Please include author's name, address, affiliation, email address, and phone number on *separate* title page. Send inquiries and submissions to Laurie Grobman and Candace Spigelman, Penn State University, Berks-Lehigh Valley College, P.O. Box 7009, Tulpehocken Road, Reading, PA 19610-6009. E-mail inquiries to leg8@psu.edu or cxs11@psu.edu. Submissions are accepted all year, but to be considered for Volume 2, please submit your manuscript by March 1, 2004.

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