

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E E T T E R

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

December, 2006

— FROM THE EDITOR —

Welcome to another issue of *WLN*, one that explores fresh perspectives on familiar themes and also branches into new fields. Gail Nash presents us with a new lens through which to view tutor/student interaction—politeness theory—to explore differing cultural views of polite interaction. Erika Spohrer, using ecological community theory as her lens, ranges from philosophy to physics to remind us why viewing the center as marginal isn't meaningful. The tutors of Northeastern University share their twelve tips for tutoring, a useful reminder for all tutors. And Mark Boone uses the lens of philosophy to reflect on why the mantra of improving writers, not the writing, is so critical to the success of tutoring.

In the next few months, many of us will be meeting at various conferences. But not everyone has the time and funds needed to be at these meetings. So, for those groups that post conference summaries on their Web sites, *WLN* will gladly include notices of your reports on your Web sites.

In the meantime, as many of us pack up and put work behind us in order to enjoy quiet vacation time and holiday celebrations, I wish us all continued joy in our work, high quality relaxing time, and a new year of peace. (And for those of you applying for the writing center positions listed in this issue, success in filling the job of your choice.)

◆ Muriel Harris

INSIDE

Politeness in the writing center: An analysis of NS tutor and NNS student discourse

◆ Gail Nash ◆
Page 1

What Margins? The Writing Center at the Small, Liberal Arts College

◆ Erika Spohrer ◆
Page 7

Tips for Better Tutoring

◆ Kalo Clarke, Andrew Hyzy, Anne Kingsley, Stephanie Loomis, Kurt Moellering, Aparna Mujumdar, Jessica Rickettson ◆
Page 12

Tutor's Column: "The Writing Center as Standing Reserve"

◆ Mark J. Boone ◆
Page 14

Calendar for Writing Center Associations

Page 16

POLITENESS IN THE WRITING CENTER: AN ANALYSIS OF NS TUTOR AND NNS STUDENT DISCOURSE

◆ Gail Nash
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"This paper make C. Fix it."

"Just where does the thesis go? You're always telling me something different."

"I hate working with Jun Li. She's so rude!"

The previous exchanges were recently discussed in writing center training sessions at Oklahoma Christian University (OC). OC is a private, liberal arts university in central OK with a (mostly residential) student population of just over 2000. The OC writing center, The Writer's Block, exists to serve this community by offering peer tutoring. Most OC students are traditional students with U.S. citizenship; international students number just under 4% of the student body. Although the number of international students is low in comparison to the student body, their presence in The Writer's Block sometimes leads to feelings of frustration on both sides of the conference table as indicated by the opening comments.

These comments illustrate that issues of politeness are clearly a part of writing center work. Interactions between native English speaking tutors (NS) and non-native English speaking

continued on page 2

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students (NNS) are especially tenuous because misunderstandings can occur from differing cultural views of politeness. Polite behavior and speech in one culture can actually be perceived as impolite by another culture.

North American¹ cultures, for example, generally equate indirectness with politeness. As Jo Mackiewicz and Kathryn Riley point out, "Linguists have for a long time noticed that, with few exceptions, being less direct and more indirect in what one says generally makes one more polite" (83). But the same is not true across cultures. Elda Weizman cites studies which show that Israeli, German, and British cultures find indirect hints to be highly impolite (92). These cultures value directness; so a directly stated utterance may be the most polite way of communicating because it eliminates guessing and saves time.

Consequently, North American tutors may not be aware that their efforts to be polite can misfire when they are conferencing with international students. This paper analyzes tutor and student comments against Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's politeness theory in an effort to prepare tutors for effective intercultural communication experiences. After giving a brief overview of the theory, I present findings from a small survey of OC tutors (NS) and students (NNS) and conclude with recommendations for NS tutors working with NNS students.

THE THEORY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Published in 1987, Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness has become the "model against which most research on politeness defines itself" (Harris 27-28). Brown and Levinson categorize politeness as either positive politeness or negative politeness and tie both strategies to the importance of face in every culture. They define 'face' as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (61). According to Brown and Levinson, "face wants" may consist of negative or positive face (61). When speakers appeal to positive face wants (i.e. the desire to be appreciated and approved of), they employ positive politeness language that emphasizes "in-group identity, shows concern, [and] seeks areas of agreement" (R. Brown 26). Compliments represent typical positive politeness strategies. When speakers appeal to negative face wants (i.e. the desire to be free from imposition and distraction), they use negative politeness language—language that seeks to reduce any imposition. Apologies represent typical negative politeness strategies (R. Brown 26-27).

In most situations, everyone seeks "to maintain each others' face" (Brown and Levinson 61; Wilson, Kim, and Meischke). Thus, communicating effectively involves saving face—both for the speaker—identified by Brown and Levinson as (S) and for the addressee (H)². However, Brown and Levinson point out that S and H are mitigated by three other factors: power, social distance, and imposition. For example, S will speak more politely when the target (H) has more power than S, when the social distance between the two is great, and when the imposition is high.

Brown and Levinson identify five "superstrategies" used to communicate. They list strategies from the most direct/impolite (bald-on-record) to the least direct/impolite (being silent) (60). While any of the five strategies could be used during a writing center session, most North American tutors probably avoid speaking directly in a bald-on-record manner out of concerns for politeness. Do NNS students appreciate such a strategy or do concerns for politeness obscure the intended feedback for these students? If polite and direct expressions are at odds, which do NNS students prefer in a writing center session? The rest of this paper addresses these questions and finds that the NNS students in this study prefer clarity over politeness if one must supersede the other.

THE SURVEY: EXPLANATIONS AND FINDINGS

Using Brown and Levinson's paradigm, I designed a survey to determine whether NS tutors and NNS students on our campus perceived politeness in the same way. I listed tutor statements that corre-

sponded to Brown and Levinson's first four politeness strategies: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. I then asked three NNS students from my classes and the three NS tutors from the Writer's Block to evaluate the statements according to clarity, politeness, and preference. The NNS students were from Taiwan, Japan, and Ethiopia. Each had been in the states for less than a year. Two were female; one was male. The NS tutors were all females who came from Oklahoma, Texas, and Missouri. Their experience working as writing center tutors varied from one to three semesters. Two were juniors; one was a senior.

The following is an explanation of Brown and Levinson's first four politeness strategies with tutor statements that exemplify the strategy. These statements, without any explanation, were listed on the survey and participants were asked to identify which statements were most and least polite, which statements were most and least clear, and which statements would most likely be said. Participants were also asked in a follow-up interview to clarify their answers.

1. Bald on record: the communication is the most direct, concise possible. Because of its directness and concision, it is also considered to be the least polite.

- a. "You don't have a thesis"
- b. "You have lots of language mistakes."
- c. "This paper doesn't fit the assignment."

These statements are 'bald' because they are unmitigated, and they are 'on-record' because they are explicitly stated. "Bald-on-record utterances are the clearest of all strategies" (Mackiewicz and Riley 86).

2. Positive politeness: the communication is framed so that all parties maintain a positive face. "Positive politeness is an effort to make up for a threat to the desired self-image" (R. Brown 25).

- a. "You have some good details. I'm not sure how they connect to your thesis."
- b. "Prepositions are so hard in a foreign language. Can you find the preposition mistake in this sentence?"
- c. "This is a very interesting story. How does it fit the assignment?"

In each of these statements the tutor saves face (for the student) by implying the lack of understanding is the tutor's weakness or by implying the student is smart enough to find mistakes or clarify logic. The tutor (S) phrases statements that appeal to the student's (H) need for approval.

3. Negative politeness: the communication is framed to reduce any imposition toward the listener (H). In other words, pointing out the need for revision poses a imposition on the student (H), so the tutor (S) tries to soften the imposition by asking questions, referring to the teacher, and seeking help in understanding the writing.

- a. "I'm not sure what your thesis is. Would you underline it for me? What if we moved it to the end of the paragraph? Has your teacher talked to you about that?"
- b. "This preposition doesn't sound right to me. I think I would say "in" instead of "on." Does that sound right to you?"
- c. "I like the story, but I'm not sure how it fits with the assignment. If we move it to the beginning and make it part of the introduction—a story makes a good introduction—can we think of other points to support your thesis?"

Negative politeness strategies are more polite and less direct than the first two. However,

“Misunderstandings can occur from differing cultural views of politeness. Polite behavior and speech in one culture can actually be perceived as impolite in another culture.”

they become wordier and the student has to deduce meaning. The tutor tries to reduce the imposition by phrasing “Would you? Could you?” questions and in some cases doing the “work” for the student.

4. Off record: the communication hints at the real message. Off record comments protect the writer’s face and are thus the most polite by North American standards. They are also the least direct.

- a. “Different countries have different writing styles. In the United States, a thesis statement should be explicitly stated, usually at the end of the introduction.”
- b. “Prepositions are hard in a foreign language, aren’t they?”
- c. “Some teachers don’t like too much “story” in an essay, even if it’s an interesting one like yours.”

Off record strategies leave inference completely up to the listener (H). In a writing center scenario, this strategy would probably be considered more frustrating than face-saving.

Mackiewicz and Riley note that NNSs actually prefer bald-on-record utterances because “they were maximally clear and more closely matched the pragmatics of’ the students’ own culture (87). In my survey, the NNS students’ concern was with clarity more than politeness. For example, for the bald-on-record statement, “You don’t have a thesis,” one NNS student wrote that she preferred this kind of direct statement because “it’s very clearly to tell the writer’s paper do not have a thesis.” The same was true for “This paper doesn’t fit the assignment.” All the students agreed that they “most preferred” this kind of statement because it was “somewhat” or “very clear.” On the other hand, the bald-on-record statement “This paper has lots of mistakes” was “least preferred,” by all three students not because of its directness, but because it was not specific. One student commented, “I know that. This statement doesn’t help me.”

In terms of politeness, the NNS students generally found the bald-on-record statements to be neutral; however, the NS tutors considered the statements to be “somewhat impolite”; consequently, they identified these statements as ones they would “least likely” or “never” say. Conversely, while the NNS students “least preferred” the off-record statements because they were less clear, the NS tutors rated these statements as ones they would “most likely say” because they were “most polite.”

This discrepancy is significant because concerns for politeness may guide tutors’ comments; whereas, these NNS students considered politeness to be a neutral issue. This preference for clarity over politeness corresponds with studies that have found a preference for direct strategies (Steil and Hillman) and a disregard for hints (Holtgraves and Yang).

IN CONCLUSION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TUTORS

1. *Don’t sacrifice clarity in an effort to be “polite.” Bald-on-record isn’t necessarily bad.*

Bald-on-record directness avoids the misunderstandings Julian House warns about, such as the “failure to interpret [the] real meaning” (23). Teresa Thonus illustrates such failure with the following transcribed dialog between a NS tutor and NNS student:

T: Now what we haven’t addressed is any of the sentence-level stuff . . . Do you have a friend that can read this, once you’ve made all your changes?

S: Do I have a friend who can read?

T: Who can read this?

S: What do you mean?

T: Someone who can read through and say, “This doesn’t make sense to me” (10).

The tutor’s initial effort to be polite failed. A bald-on-record suggestion (“Have a friend read over this. . . .”) would have been more direct but would have felt less polite to the tutor. Indeed such directness would go against the tutor’s training as “coach.” Fortunately in the case above, the student



HONORS AND AWARDS

Congratulations to Jane Smith, Director of the Winthrop Writing Center, for being named Margaret M. Bryant Distinguished Professor of English. The award honors a faculty member at Winthrop University who has distinguished herself in teaching, scholarship, and service. Winthrop's President's announcement of the honor noted that "Smith encourages student scholarship in areas of composition, rhetoric and Writing Center pedagogy, and issues related to Writing Center tutoring. She has mentored student scholars who have given presentations at the Southeastern Writing Association Conference and at national and international conferences." Jane has also done yeoman work as an officer of SWCA.



Congratulations to Michele Eodice, the recipient of the 2006 Ron Maxwell Award for "Distinguished Leadership in Promoting the Collaborative Learning Practices of Peer Tutors in Writing," awarded at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW), recently held at the University of Michigan.

sought clarification ("Do I have a friend that can read?"), and the tutor had the opportunity to clear up the misunderstanding. In other cases, a student might simply nod and leave the center without an accurate understanding of what the tutor was suggesting. A bald-on-record statement would have been clearer and would have saved both parties some time and frustration.

2. Be aware of different cultural views of saving face and being polite. The writing center set-up affects both.

Although all cultures have face as Brown and Levinson claim, all cultures do not maintain face in the same way. Perhaps the NS tutor's concept of saving face is not the same as the NNS student's. Or perhaps just by entering the writing center, face is somewhat (by no means entirely) suspended. Thus students' expectations about saving face are lower than usual. Students expect to have their work examined (in their view "critiqued"?). They have come for that reason. Consequently, standard politeness strategies, appreciated in other circumstances, are less important than "getting the job done," i.e., getting accurate feedback to improve the student's paper. This finding corresponds with Janet Meyer; Shoshana Blum-Kulka; and Robert Craig, et al. whose studies found that situation or context affects face and that face wants differ based on the situation.

For example in the (U.S.) writing center set up, the tutor (H) inherently expects more politeness when the situation clearly establishes that the tutor has more "power" than the student asking for help. In other words, the tutor (even subconsciously) expects a certain level of deference in requests for help, regardless of whether the student is a NS or a NNS. Native English speakers generally understand this cultural expectation, but it may be lost to NNSs who perceive power and distance differently than North Americans.

In fact, Thomas Holtgraves and Joong-NamYang found that differences in politeness strategies between cultures are directly connected to the perception of social distance between the cultures. For example, among strangers or even acquaintances, North Americans generally tend to assume greater social distance than do Koreans. So Koreans are not necessarily more or less polite than North Americans; they just perceive less social distance among peers (253).

Thus, the Asian student who said to the tutor, "Paper make C; fix it," could easily have been communicating on the notion that the social distance between her and the tutor was very small, so the imposition was small. Thus the language could be direct. This explanation is "consistent with other research . . . suggesting that individuals from Eastern cultures pay more attention to interpersonal and relational cues. In contrast, Americans rely less on relational cues but more on the content of the verbal exchange to infer meaning" (Ambady, et al. 999). Therefore, the NNS student who says "Paper make C. Fix it." is conveying meaning through the relationship (you are the tutor here to help me) and not through the words alone, which are secondary to the meaning of the message.

Brown and Levinson claim that understanding cultural norms of politeness enables communicators to "make strong predictions" about communicating effectively within a culture (12). But Patricia Bou-Franch and Pilar Garcés-Conejos extend its effectiveness across cultures noting that "politeness theory is an optimal tool to teach, explain, and understand social interaction and to provide an insight into what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior in different genres and cultures" (18). However, a written survey of politeness is limited in that it does not take into consideration the element of tone. In this survey, one student specifically said it was hard to evaluate the statements because it "depends on how the tutor says it." For example, he noted that the bald-on-record comment "You don't have a thesis" could be said in a friendly way and would not be offensive.

In spite of its limitations, the study proved worthwhile in showing the value these students placed on receiving clear (bald-on-record) instruction during their writing center visits. The study also was useful in showing, even on a small scale, the differences in perception of polite speech between the

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WRITING CENTER DIRECTOR JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Responsible for leadership and administration of the Writing Center, including peer tutoring and one-credit courses administered by the Writing Center, and for the College WAC program.

Qualifications: Master's degree in English or closely related field required, Ph.D. preferred, concentration in writing center administration or WAC preferred. Experience teaching in college-level composition required; community college preferred. Demonstrated understanding of and commitment to the teaching mission of a comprehensive community college; experience supervising and training peer tutors; demonstrated ability to collaborate with interdisciplinary faculty; familiarity with managing personnel and resources and administering a budget; familiarity with electronic tutoring and/or course management software; strong communication skills.

Please submit an unofficial transcript(s) and complete the "Question for faculty applicants" with a short essay (use first person) explaining what you would tell your students on the first day of class. Also, include a cover letter and a vita or resume, as well as a JCCC application (on-line or hard copy). Please submit letters of reference. If employed, certified transcripts for all college-level education will be required. Full-time, regular, faculty appointment leading to continuing contract eligibility. Twelve-month position. Starting date: July 1, 2007.

Deadline: Review of applications will begin February 1, 2007, and continue until position is filled. Web site: <<http://web.jccc.net/hr/jobs/07-209.htm>>.

cultures represented. A further, more detailed study concerning perceptions of politeness and clarity in the writing center could certainly affect tutor training and effectiveness in dealing with international students. Steven Pinker refers to politeness as "convoluted departures from plain speaking" (230). Perhaps the writing center is somewhat exempt from "convoluted" politeness rules. Perhaps in the writing center direct and to the point is polite after all.

End Notes

¹All of the research is based in the U.S., but writing "U.S. tutors" and "U.S. culture" becomes cumbersome; yet I did not want to overshadow our South American friends by equating American with U.S. Thus I have chosen to refer to the U.S. based research as "North American."

²For the sake of clarity I avoid overusing Brown and Levinson's letter symbols (S, H, etc.); however, to maintain the connection between my analysis and their theory, I do occasionally sprinkle the (S), (H) symbols throughout the document, but always with a reference to their meaning.

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WHAT MARGINS? THE WRITING CENTER AT THE SMALL, LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

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As odd as it may sound, this is a story of trees, and the birds that live in them, the insects they eat, the roots of trees, and the delicate off-balance balance in which the natural world holds itself. To begin, Darwin's entangled bank: "it is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other [are] dependent on each other in so complex a manner" (459). Darwin's prose is often laden with the idea of competition; later in this passage, in fact, he summons images of species at war with one another. But here, his entangled bank is home to species who, though they may compete with one another, vitally rely on one another. His entangled bank is, literally, entangled; all species are connected in an intricate web of life.

The lush vitality of natural imagery has, wonderfully, seeped its way into writing center theory: Alice Gillam writes, "like a fertile, overgrown garden, the writing center breeds conversations between writer and tutor which grow and spread in directions neither consciously intends" (3). The title of her article—"Writing Center Ecology"—in fact highlights the writing center as an ecosystem, a space of enmeshed identities and discourses. And while pivotal writing center work may not reference ecology obliquely, the very language we've used to describe our interactions with students suggests an undeniable interrelatedness: we refer to Burkean parlors abuzz with conversation; we consider the writer (holistically), not simply the writing; we're engaged in a conversation of mankind. Our centers are dialogic, and knowledge is created through social interaction. Even contact zones, where conflict occurs, rely on interconnections. The writing center as an ecosystem of interrelatedness has become so routine as to become a commonplace.

The story when we move outside the writing center walls, though, is very different. Although programs like WAC certainly encourage our writing center roots to spread throughout the university, in large part, the paradigm that considers the writing center's place within the larger university is one of disconnect, opposition, difference, and even outsidersness.

Thank goodness.

For so many students, the writing center is a space that offers an *alternative* model of education that liberates them from traditional banking models. In this paradigm, the writing center and larger university community are seen as oppositional; our collaborative learning models sharply contrast the hierarchical models that centralize authority in the instructor.

Tilly and John Warnock pointedly detail the writing center as alternative to traditional classrooms: "in writing centers, writing is taught with a focus...on holistic and human concerns, not errors and isolated skills" (16); "a crucial part of [writing centers] is to restore to students the sense of their own authority and responsibility. In traditional teaching, the student's sense of their own learning is irrelevant, even counterproductive because students must feel themselves void of knowledge in order to accept that which is being given or driven into them" (19). The writers go on to name—and even celebrate—the writing center as "outsider."

While this overtly antagonistic tone has perhaps dulled somewhat in writing center criticism of late, the paradigm of opposition and disconnectedness—of writing center as liberatory alterna-

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WRITING CENTER DIRECTOR U. OF WASHINGTON— BOTHEL

This individual will report to the Director of the Teaching and Learning Center, which houses faculty development and student support in writing and quantitative skills. For a more complete description, see the Web site: <<http://www.uwb.edu/hr/employment.xhtml>>, and click on "Writing Director."

Minimum requirements include: A Ph.D. in composition, rhetoric or related field. Demonstrated excellence in teaching writing and in writing center pedagogy and administration. Experience working with nontraditional college populations. Experience working with faculty to integrate and assess writing across the curriculum. Interest in participating in an integrated approach to teaching writing, library research and technology skills. Excellent oral and written communication skills. Equivalent education/experience may substitute for stated requirements. Desired qualification: Experience in using and teaching rhetoric of new media.

Application Process: Completing an online cover letter assessment as well as the Employment Eligibility Assessment to obtain additional information that will be used in the evaluation process. The assessment(s) will appear on your screen for you to complete as soon as you select "Apply to this Position" on this job announcement. Once you begin the assessment, it must be completed at that time. If you select to take it later, it will appear on your "My Jobs" page to take when you are ready. Please note that your application will not be reviewed and you will not be considered for this position until the assessment is complete.

tive— persists. Through this opposition, an essential dualism prevails; it's us and them, us being, of course, the writing center and them being the university writ large.

This is the paradigm that got me excited about writing centers. It's a paradigm that indirectly uses a vocabulary of ecology—community, dialogue, relationships—to offer a discourse of liberation and critical consciousness. At the large university where I worked as a tutor and then as Associate Director of the writing center, this vocabulary was absolutely essential. Feeling slightly exploited myself by the machinery that is the corporate university, I was quick to recognize the language of oppression. At a huge Research I institution, that discourse was completely logical. With over 40,000 undergraduates, the school could easily educate a student who had been in perhaps only three classes where the teacher knew her name; frosh-level lecture courses of 300 students were not an anomaly. The banking model was no doubt commonplace. Fortunately, composition classes were capped at 24, and students often relished in this personal attention—for it was the anomaly. The humanities in general offered some relief, but while classes like literature could be filled with only 30 students, two of the three literature classes I taught had 60 students in them.

My task here is not to bash large universities; they are what they are, and I was there because I chose to be there. What an oasis, though, the writing center was amidst all this hugeness.

And what an abrupt shift it was, then, when I joined the faculty at Eckerd College, a very small college of about 1,700 students in St. Petersburg, Florida. While a “huge” intro to marine biology course may enroll 60 students, the school has an average 1:14 professor/student ratio. “Individual attention” are our P.R. buzzwords, and, if anything, students get too much of it in the form of mentors and involved instructors.

In this context, the paradigm I had so adored—that of the writing center as “alternative” or “outsider”—no longer made much sense. Here, “traditional” banking models of teaching are the anomaly. “I give only essay questions on my marine science finals because I want students to synthesize the material,” I heard during a teaching practicum. “My students learn better from one another, in group work,” was my introduction to the management curriculum. And when I asked the economics instructor whose class followed mine if we should move the desks back into rows, she exclaimed, “God no. Just bring them in closer.” And during an extended conversation with a marine biology instructor, I learned that he had completely revamped his lab. Instead of covering loads of material for students to repeat back in the form of lab reports and exams, he said, he designed the course so that the students could learn how to ask the questions. “It's all about the process,” he told me.

A caveat: I am not trying to glorify small schools over large ones. There are, in fact, introductory courses at Eckerd that surely employ the banking model. What I am trying to demonstrate is that there is no doubt a shift in priorities and practices from a Research I university to a small teaching college. And it is this shift that has raised the following questions for me: what if our practices within the writing center parallel those outside of it? Or, to put it another way, what if the school at large employs the non-traditional practices that have been the hallmark of the writing center? How can we conceive of ourselves as outsiders—or even as different, oppositional?

Well, we can't. We can no longer position ourselves as disconnected.

It seems to me, then, that in order to conceptualize the writing center in a small college, we require a new paradigm. Not a paradigm that's “new and improved,” by the way. I don't see this as a progression to a better paradigm. Rather, because we're dealing with a different set of terms, we need a different way to talk about them.

TAKE NOTE

IWCA CONFERENCE

It's never too early to start planning your trip to Houston for the International Writing Centers Association and South Central Writing Centers Association conference: April 12-14, 2007
The Magnolia Hotel
Houston, TX

Conference theme: "A Space for Writing: Writing Centers and Place"

For information, contact Dagmar Corrigan at corrigan@uhd.edu, or visit the Conference Web site: <http://ahss.ualr.edu/iwca>.

The paradigm that makes the most sense to me is in fact simply an extension of one that I've argued we already use, one that borrows from the sciences, philosophy, and the arts. It's an ecological paradigm, a model relying on interconnectedness rather than outsidership, on the whole rather than the parts. Tension doesn't vanish in this model—not at all. What changes, though, is the dualistic relationship between writing center and institution; dualistic, two-way linearity—us and them—is replaced by a network. The writing center is embedded in an institutional network, a web seen as a whole. Darwin's entangled bank, then, represents the institution rather than just the writing center.

Clearly, an ecological paradigm relies most heavily on the science of ecology: "deep ecological awareness," writes Fritjof Capra, "recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature" (6). Aldo Leopold, considered by some (and disregarded by others) as the founder of the ecological movement, insists that an ecological worldview emphasizes the community over the individual. And Leopold's staunchest defender, philosopher J. Baird Callicot, uses the ecosystem to illustrate a profound interdependence:

Each of the myriad living forms [in a biotic system], while pursuing its own interest, performs a function which contributes to the overall flow of materials, services, and energy within the system. Plants, while nourishing themselves on air, water, and minerals, fix solar energy in a form usable by some animals. They also produce free oxygen as a byproduct. Grazing animals, as they feed directly on plants, begin the process of recycling plant nutrients, restoring carbon dioxide to the air and minerals to the soil, a process completed by worms and bacteria. In general, each thing has a certain role or function in the natural economy to which it becomes adapted. ("Elements" 72)

The notion of interdependence is key here; not only is each organism dependent on other organisms, it is also dependent on the ecosystem as a whole. Again, this view does not erase conflict. Conflict, in fact, is part of interdependence. The decaying animals killed by predators contribute to the nourishment of the soil, which nourish the plants, and on and on. An ecological perspective, though, invites us to view even conflict as a vital part of the living system as a whole; in the ecosystem, we step back to see an individual death as an integral aspect of a larger community.

This view strikingly transforms the dualistic understanding that the us vs. them paradigm enacts. Instead of lines of influence—and conflict, power, etc—moving back and forth between "the institution" and "the writing center," the channels of influence radiate and crisscross: the "network," writes Capra, is the "central metaphor of ecology" (10). He goes on to insist that "the first and most obvious property of any network is its nonlinearity—it goes in all directions" (82). In terms of understanding our writing centers, then—at least in some small college environments—the network metaphor embeds our centers within the institution. While some of our specific interests may indeed conflict with certain aspects of the institution, we are nonetheless a vital part of that institution, and our actions connect us to the actions of, say, the management department, the grounds crew, the administration. We simply cannot see ourselves as outsiders.

While I have articulated this paradigm in ecological terms, it beautifully represents an interdisciplinary bent. Callicot connects it to the idealist philosophies of Hegel, Fichte, and Bradley in that "the basic idea is that a thing's essence is exhaustively determined by its relationships; [...] it cannot be conceived apart from its relationships with other things" ("Metaphysical" 110). And Capra not surprisingly connects an ecological worldview to the romanticism of Goethe. "Each creature," Goethe writes, "is but a patterned gradation of one great harmonious whole" (qtd. in Capra 21). While the connection to Romanticism might initially cause us to bristle, trained as we are to resist—and rightly, I think—Romantic notions of "the individual," an ecological paradigm in fact challenges the notion of stable individuality. This happens with quantum theory, as I'll show later,

ANNOUNCEMENTS

WRITING CENTER ASSISTANT DIRECTOR THE TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

The Center employs a full-time director, program specialist, and a staff of forty undergraduate and graduate writing tutors. Temple University is located in Philadelphia, PA. The Writing Center's Web site can be found at <<http://www.temple.edu/writingcenter>>.

The Assistant Director will manage and develop the student services offered in the Writing Center, including face-to-face tutoring, online tutoring, classroom workshops, and a fellows program. The position will also entail managing the tutor development program for a large and diverse tutoring staff. Writing is an essential component of this job: the Assistant Director will produce a broad range of documents for use by faculty, students, and administrators. In collaboration with the Director and IT personnel, the Assistant Director will coordinate the development and maintenance of a large, complex Web site and of a student database.

This is a fulltime staff position with a competitive salary and excellent benefits. To apply, 1) Go to Temple's Human Resources Web site: <<http://www.temple.edu/hr/>>, 2) Click on "Jobs@ Temple" (in the menu bar on the left), and 3) Scroll down and enter this job req. number in the "search box: "TU-09388" Please reference TU-09388. AA, EOE, m/f/d/v.

but it also happens at levels I've already articulated, for, as Callicot writes, "relations are 'prior to' the things related, and systemic wholes woven from these relations are prior to their component parts" ("Metaphysical" 110). Deconstruction is only a hair's breath away.

The ecological paradigm can also be found in other areas of science, especially physics. Here, the concept of "ecology" is replaced by the concept of a system: "the system has come to mean an integrated whole whose essential properties arise from the relationships between its parts, and 'systems thinking' [is] the understanding of a phenomenon within the context of a larger whole" (Capra 27). Existing in a state of dis-equilibrium, with a constant flow of energy moving among parts, "systems thinking is always process thinking" (Capra 42). As Heraclites put it, "everything flows" (qtd. in Capra 43).

And here, as promised, is where quantum physics comes in. Quantum physics has been so revolutionary because it replaces the notion of "thingness" with the notion of patterns. "Quantum theory," Capra argues, "forced [scientists] to accept the fact that the solid material objects of classical physics dissolve at the subatomic level to wavelike patterns of probabilities" (30). Thus, parts—things—dissolve, and "what we call a part is merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships" (Capra 37). So while I've been talking about the college as a web of relationships, when we break it down into its "parts," we find that they, too, are webs of intricacies. The ecological web that is the college is composed an astonishing number of webs: the college as web, the writing center as web, the individuals within the writing center as a web, the cells that make up their kidneys as a web. As we hone in on smaller and smaller parts, we find not more "thingness" but more relationships, more energy, more activity. This dynamism shook up the science community during the early and mid-twentieth century, but its clear ties to critical theory—theory that forces us to challenge notions of discrete, static individuality—help us to view even a writing center enmeshed in an institution as liberatory.

Okay, all pretty heady stuff, but what, then, is the upshot of this new paradigm? Well, to be most idealistic, it can encourage an entire worldview that sees our role on the planet not as master of the environment and other nations but as merely one aspect in relationship to those things. On a more practical level, it may encourage a more healthy "life" for our writing centers: Capra writes "what is destroyed when a living organism is dissected is its pattern. The components are still there, but the configuration of the relationships among them—the pattern—is destroyed, and thus the organism dies" (Capra 81). To take this one step further, taking care of our writing centers means taking care of our institutions; the health of the institution means the health of our writing centers. Callicot writes that "a species is what it is because it has adapted to a niche in the ecosystem. The whole, the system itself, thus literally...shapes and forms its component species" ("Conceptual Foundations" 87). This isn't news; in writing centers, we've always felt pressure from our institutions. But an ecological paradigm insists not only that we feel—and acknowledge—that pressure but also that we recognize that the health of the whole determines the health of its parts; Chief Seattle in fact claimed that "man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself" (qtd. in Gore 259). Practically, this means taking an active role in committees and discussions that affect the health of the college. And we can form alliances, for example getting writing consultants teamed up with a woman's group to organize hurricane relief.

This last example, in fact, points to yet a larger challenge that an ecological paradigm poses. Just as we must enlarge the ecological model from writing centers to our institutions at large, so must we must expand it beyond our individual institutions to the community at large, the communities in which we are enmeshed. We must force ourselves from the misleading isolation we may feel from the community outside our schools' boundaries. This means inviting the "outside" in, and taking

the “inside” out. Eckard College works hard at this with its service learning opportunities and its program for returning students, but the writing center needs to become a vital part of it.

What I’ve suggested, mainly, is that at small schools, we can move from a model defined by fragmentation to a model defined by networks—an ecological model. Using Goethe to express a literary viewpoint on the matter, while useful, does not get to the heart of this change. Thus, I’d like to end by using a quote from Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* to represent the network in the midst of apparent fragmentation. The literary modernists are known, among other things, for the fragmentation—of society, of consciousness—that they represent through form (think Eliot’s *The Wasteland*). But Woolf, I think, who formally makes some of the same moves as Eliot, also offers a vision of interconnectness, of patterns. I quote from *Mrs. Dalloway*, a text vitally about the web between past and present: “and they went further and further from her, being attached to her by a thin [spider’s] thread...which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London; as if one’s friends were attached to one’s body...by a thin thread” (112). Here, the spider’s thread lingers; it illuminates all of the relationships the characters share. Interrelatedness appears amidst seeming fragmentation. And we can go on to imagine the spider’s thread connecting us not only to other people but also to all we encounter, all we resist, all we rely on. And ultimately, when we step back far enough, we see the spider’s thin thread for what it is; we see it as a web.

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TIPS FOR BETTER TUTORING

*Kalo Clarke, Andrew Hyzy, Anne Kingsley, Stephanie Loomis, Kurt Moellering, Aparna Mujumdar, Jessica Rickettson
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At the Northeastern University Writing Center, we created a dozen tips (some pedagogical and some personal) to refresh our tutoring tactics as we prepared for a new semester.

- 1. Accentuate the Positive:** When working with students, avoid using negative words. This alters nothing in our work, only the tone. Instead of saying, “I can’t write your paper for you” or “I can’t edit your paper,” tutors can “say” what they can do or even just “enact” what they can do.
- 2. Smile a Mile:** Make it a point to start every tutoring session with a smile. Look the student in the face for, say, five full seconds, smiling, before you turn your attention to the work they brought in. Most of us glance at best before getting to work. Instead, think of the smile as part of the work. Maybe extend the smile with a question like “How’s your day going?”
- 3. Cash in on Collaboration:** Prompt students to talk, starting with a question like “What are your aims in this section of the paper?” This creates the opportunity for a two-way dialogue and for a tutor/student partnership.
- 4. Find the Gangsters in the Grammar:** For students who want and need help with grammar, it’s useful for the tutor to read through the whole paper first to identify major grammar problems. This way the tutor can focus first on the higher order problems.
- 5. Favor Your Flavor:** Next time you’re feeling really happy and focused, give that feeling the name of your favorite taste. Then when you start to slip into frustration during a tutoring session, tell yourself “butterscotch” (or whatever yours is) so that you can go back to that great “up” feeling and apply it to the rest of the session.
- 6. Space Out on the Web:** Web tutors (tutoring students who submit writing online) need to get comfortable with making generalizations. One way to do this is to not touch the actual text but to make comments in a separate space while reading through. This guarantees that you won’t be giving the student suggestions in the form of “Here is where I found a problem, and this is how you should fix it.”
- 7. Practice Personal Hygiene:** Brush your teeth or use breath enhancements. (Think how you’d feel sitting right next to and trying to learn from someone who reeked of stale coffee or tuna sandwich.) Don’t drink carbonated beverages or smoke right before you tutor. Don’t douse yourself in stinky cologne no matter how great you think it smells.
- 8. Make the Clock Call:** Be realistic about how much can be accomplished in the time constraints of one appointment. Start by commenting on time limitations. Then if it becomes clear that you won’t be able to cover everything the student hoped to address, stop and ask him/her to tell you what he or she wants to focus on for the remaining time. That way the student is more likely to be satisfied with what, if not how much, was covered.
- 9. Work Inside the Noise:** Concentration is key; yet the writing center can be a noisy place (other tutors talking, people walking in for appointments, the phone ringing, students and tutors moving to computers, etc.). Other things such as the tutor’s academic or personal concerns can also creep in. If you’re struggling with distractions, start reading the student’s text out loud and comment on things as you go. Your own voice blocks out other noises and stray thoughts. And often when students hear their own words read back to them, they also hear mistakes or awkward moments in the writing.
- 10. Question the Question:** Start with questioning the student’s understanding of the assignment they are responding to. Too often the confusion in written work comes from not really understanding the questions or prompts provided by their instructor.
- 11. Hold Back:** Don’t be too quick to make corrections. When a student has written a sentence that is awkwardly phrased or that contains

DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR WRITING EXCELLENCE MIAMI UNIVERSITY

Miami University seeks a creative, energetic director to provide vision and leadership for the Roger and Joyce Howe Student Center for Writing Excellence. The center, which will open in fall 2007, is an integral part of a writing-across-the-curriculum program funded by a recent gift of \$10.5 million. The director will hold tenure at the rank of associate or full professor.

Responsibilities: Create and implement programs and services designed to help Miami become a national leader in preparing students to write well and learn through writing; develop programs that appeal to and serve a broad range of student writers; manage the budget; work synergistically on faculty and curriculum programs of the Howe Center for Writing Excellence and other university initiatives; plan and teach one or more courses that prepare undergraduate and graduate students to assist other students with their writing; recruit, supervise and evaluate classified staff and students; design and conduct assessments of the student writing center; conduct and publish research related to student writing in higher education.

Required qualifications: Terminal degree; record of teaching, research and service that merits appointment as a tenured associate or full professor in an academic department at Miami; experience working in a student writing center; ability to interact effectively with a wide range of constituencies and collaborators, including undergraduate and graduate students, faculty and staff; excellent communication skills; strong organizational and time-management skills; high energy and enthusiasm; ability to work independently and in teams.

Desired qualifications: Experience directing a student writing center; experience training and mentoring peer writing tutors; experience writing and teaching writing in digital media; publication and research interests in student writing, writing in the disciplines, writing across the curriculum or writing center studies.

Submit letter of application and curriculum vitae to Dr. Paul Anderson, Roger and Joyce Howe Center for Writing Excellence. Phone 513/529-6006. Screening of applications begins January 5, 2007 and will continue until the position is filled.

Women and minorities are encouraged to apply. Miami University is an EO/AA employer offering same-sex domestic partner benefits. Appointments and nominations are public records in Ohio. The campus safety report is available at <www.muohio.edu/righttoknow>; hard copy provided upon request.

a grammatical issue, point out the sentence and let the student re-read it or read it aloud. The student will often identify the problem and edit it on his/her own.

- 12. Polish Your Professionalism:** Get to the writing center a few minutes early; keep track of time as you tutor so you end on time; enter your data into the database daily; attend and actively participate in tutor meetings; follow up immediately on any reading or other assignments for tutors; never treat the writing center as your personal study hall; keep a “butterscotch” attitude toward the students you tutor, toward the other tutors you work with, and toward the writing center’s mission.



TUTOR'S COLUMN

THE WRITING CENTER AS STANDING RESERVE

◆ Mark J. Boone

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Dallas, TX

What would Martin Heidegger say about the writing center? I believe Heidegger can help us understand the problem that threatens the mission of the writing center. The lesson we can learn from him calls for a familiar vigilance: the need for the writing center to always strive to produce better writers and not better writing. However, Heidegger gives us a fresh, unique perspective of the great danger in failing at this. The writing center can become a detriment to academic excellence when it becomes the “standing reserve,” held at the ready for the moment when a student needs something done which she has found, because of the writing center, she does not need to do well.

In the “Question Concerning Technology” Martin Heidegger gives us a stark warning about what happens to the entities that make up the technological society. As the machine of society gets more and more complex, its constituent parts become more and more specialized. Each of those parts comes to be the standing reserve, held at the ready for its purpose but possessing little intrinsic value. Eventually even a human being is reduced to this standing reserve (Heidegger 332), a mere part of a machine; she can do only one thing well, and doing this one thing is her only value to society. The reduced human being is characterized by “utter availability and sheer manipulability” (Krell 309).

Based on my experience after years of tutoring, I find this to be the great threat that besets the writing center. The threat stems from the fact that the writing center is an immeasurably useful resource for a university to offer its students. The tutoring session in particular is an effective way to help aspiring scholars achieve their potential as writers.

But there is, to borrow an economic term, an opportunity cost, something that is given up in order to obtain this benefit. Picture a world where each aspiring theology and history student is handed a Turabian manual; each English student is handed an MLA manual; each psychology student is handed an APA manual; all students are given a *Simon and Schuster Handbook for Writers* and *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*; and they are left to fend for themselves. This would be a rather difficult world for students, to say the least. The advantage of such a difficult educational system is clear: the more challenging the process is, the better the scholars who complete their degree. The disadvantage is equally clear: this is a cruel world for those students whose learning abilities are not bent towards reading; for those students who need personal help and attention for learning how to write; for students who have just learned English; and the list would go on and on. A solution to this problem is the writing center, a place with trained tutors; with consultants who can use the online writing lab to make copious amounts of information available in a manageable, easily understood, easily accessible form; a place where any student can come for free instruction in Turabian, MLA, APA, reading-to-write, syntax, essay structure, and research paper skills. Through the writing center we help make higher education a little more accessible.

Unfortunately, this leads us to Heidegger's standing reserve. By becoming the writing resource available for mediocre students, we become that which stands at the ready for each new client. We replace the need a student has to do things properly for herself; we pull her weight for her. This is the curse of the writing center, when it allows itself to become a crutch for a university student, when it fills gaps in a student's writing process instead of helping each client become the best writer she can be. The workshops and handouts provided by the online writing lab are not easily susceptible to becoming the standing reserve, as they deal with universal writing principles. The tutoring session, however, is another matter. We've all seen this. How many times does a student e-mail us or walk in and say she wants a “grammar check” or that he would like us to “proofread a paper?” Do our patrons still think of us a place where it is *universal* writing principles are that expressed and refined through particular writing assignments? How often do we let our patrons down by allowing them to forget it?

The question before us is: Can we help students without making it too easy? Can we help students with their writing skills without allowing them to think of us as a tool to help their writing? The answer is, of course, that we certainly can do our job without making education easier than it is meant to be. Nevertheless, with each tutoring session we flirt with disaster; if we don't keep our heads about us, that session will hurt a writer, not help her.

Our dedication is to help a writer develop his own potential, not to help him with his particular writing assignments. We want students to do all things well, from English class to math class, from sentence-level syntax to complex discourse. However, when we allow ourselves to become another step in the process through which university students go in order to produce a quality paper, rather than being teachers and facilitators, we allow ourselves to be reduced to a cog on a wheel. The writing center is in constant danger of being the crutch that allows students not to become scholars: the grammar check that substitutes for knowledge of the English language; the advice on Works Cited pages that allows students not to go through the rigor of learning how to do Works Cited pages for themselves.

It's also easy to allow ourselves to be a part of the devaluation of education. A society's attempts to make education available to everyone can have the adverse effect of encouraging mediocrity. This is the danger that besets the academy today. Higher education has become available to a higher percentage of our society than ever before; at the same time, the value of each landmark of higher education has shrunk. Take the bachelor's degree, once the sign of being highly educated. Today, the master's degree for many fields is the minimum requirement for calling yourself educated. Part of this is simply a matter of scarcity; the supply of people with higher education is higher, so the value of each individual's education is less.

But it is unlikely that the economic aspect is the only issue. My experience has been that education has been made a little bit *easier* in many ways. Our society does everything we can to offer as many people as possible a college education. Ideally this involves turning as many as possible into scholars, helping them come up to the level of learning and learning-how-to-learn where they can all earn their respective degrees. Ideally.

In reality, it sometimes works the other way. Sometimes a college education is made a little bit easier in order to make it accessible to everybody. This sort of thing does not typically *force* negative effects on good students; a good student is still free to excel. The problem is not that a good student is forced to under-achieve in order to earn a degree. The problem is that no student is forced to achieve great things in order to get her degree. Not everyone who gets a degree is necessarily a good scholar. In sum, the availability of higher education to nearly every member of our society is an advantage where the education of the vast majority of people are concerned, but a disadvantage as regards a smaller number of students with especially high potential.

We writing center tutors are dedicated to produce better writers among the student population of our respective universities, to never merely be content with better papers. By using every particular writing assignment we see to teach a student universal writing principles, we avoid becoming a Heideggerian standing reserve, just one of the things through which a student goes through in the routine of writing her paper. We make sure that each student becomes a well-rounded scholar able to do well things pertaining to writing. By never letting a student use the tutoring session as a crutch that makes the experience of higher education too easy, we avoid the threat C. S. Lewis saw in democracy, the encouragement of mediocrity; we contribute to the strengthening of the university education, not the weakening of it. It is much better if a student leaves the writing center having genuinely learned something about commas and with a "D-" essay in his hand than if he leaves the writing center having learned nothing of writing and carrying a flawless essay. Even at the risk of complaints filed from disgruntled students who only wanted a better paper, we must not let ourselves and our high purpose be misappropriated. Heidegger reminds us of the disastrous consequences if we do.

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CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

February 8-10, 2007: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Nashville, TN

Contact: E-mail: SWCA@Comcast.net. Conference Web site: www.mtsu.edu/~uwcenter/swca2007.



March 3, 2007: Northern California Writing Center Association, in Sacramento, CA

Contact: Cheryl Smith at smithc@saclink.csus.edu and Dan Meltzer at melzer@saclink.csus.edu. Conference Web site: <http://ncwca.stanford.edu/>.



March 30-31, 2007: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Radnor, PA

Contact: John Nortlof, e-mail jnordlof@eastern.edu, phone: 610-341-1453. Conference Web site: <http://www2.mcdaniel.edu/mawca>.



April 12-14, 2007: South Central and International Writing Centers Associations, in Houston, TX

Contact: Dagmar Corrigan at

corrigan@uhd.edu. Conference Web site: <http://ahss.ualr.edu/iwca>.



April 27-29, 2007: Pacific Northwest Writing Centers Association, in Bellingham, WA

Contact: Sherri Winans at Whatcom: <http://faculty.whatcom.ctc.edu/swinans>. Conference Web site: <http://www.acadweb.wvu.edu/writingcenter/PNWCA.htm>.



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