

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 33, Number 4

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

December, 2008

## — FROM THE EDITOR —

This month you'll find interesting reading in an issue that truly has an international flavor—one article from Japan and a Tutor's Column from Puerto Rico. If you are thinking about improving your tutor application process, Kirsten Komara details how she selects more qualified tutors. Scott Johnston and Masanori Ochitani explore misunderstandings caused by different cultural nuances in languages while Ali Mageehon reflects on her space in her writing center. And for those of us who haven't yet dived into the wealth of information available through the Writing Center Research Project, Carol Mattingly gives us an overview of what's available there and reminds us to complete the survey for this year. The Tutor's Column this month, by María del C. Quintero Aguiló, describes the workings of their writing center in Puerto Rico.

If you haven't browsed through the *WLN* Web site recently (<http://writinglabnewsletter.org>), the newest addition is a list of the reviewers who, in the last two years, have read and responded to manuscripts sent to *WLN*. We owe these reviewers a huge debt of gratitude for their professional advice, time, and willingness to assist in such an important process. If there are any names missing from that list, please let me know.

My thanks to Kurt Schick, an attentive reader of *WLN*, who noticed that the Tutor's Column in the October issue appeared again in the November issue. I wish I could think of a convincing, plausible excuse, but I can't. Darn! This was simply a case of utter confusion and lack of organization on my part.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

## INSIDE

### *Creating an Effective Writing Center: Solving the Dilemma of Hiring Good Tutors*

◆ Kirsten Komara ◆

Page 1

### *Nuanced Communication in a Writing Center in Japan*

◆ Scott Johnston and  
Masanori Ochitani ◆

Page 5

### *Whose Space is It Anyway? A New Writing Center Administrator's Reflection on Negotiating Space*

◆ Ali Mageehon ◆

Page 9

### *The Writing Centers Research Project at The University of Louisville*

◆ Carol Mattingly ◆

Page 13

### *Tutor's Column: "Life at the University of Puerto Rico's Arts and Sciences English Writing Center"*

◆ María del C. Quintero Aguiló ◆

Page 14

### *Calendar for Writing Center Associations*

Page 16

## CREATING AN EFFECTIVE WRITING CENTER: SOLVING THE DILEMMA OF HIRING GOOD TUTORS

◆ Kirsten Komara  
Schreiner University  
Kerrville, TX

Finding reliable peer tutors with decent skills presents a challenge to a writing center director who is new to a university or who is building a new writing center at a small university, especially if the school has a limited budget. New writing centers that are committed to undergraduate peer tutoring face recruitment and hiring dilemmas mainly because their value within their communities has not yet been established. In order to create a well-respected writing center where the work and the tutors are valued in the larger community, a writing center director must establish consistency in three areas: hiring standards and application process, recruitment, and finances.

### 1. HIRING STANDARDS AND APPLICATION PROCESS

Establishing a rigorous but even-handed hiring process allows all applicants to be assessed objectively. This avoids all appearances of favoritism, an important initial step that helps garner larger community respect. Maintaining hiring standards builds the reputation of the writing center, making it a place where students will seek help and potentially inquire about working as a tutor. In "Tutor Recruitment and Training at Miami University," Joy Rouse says, "Our hiring process includes an ap-

*continued on page 2*

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**Manuscripts:** Recommended length for articles is approximately 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutors' Column essays, in MLA format. If possible, please send as attached files in an e-mail to submission@writinglabnewsletter.org.

plication, tutor test (to demonstrate ability to respond to writing samples), an interview, and role-playing' (2). The application process I suggest varies only marginally from Ms. Rouse's suggestions, and that variation responds to the specific needs of a new writing center, one that does not have student tutor mentors to help with role-playing and one that must raise students' interests in tutoring before any testing of tutoring abilities can take place. When students inquire about jobs, they receive a job description and an application. Since many are not familiar with writing center work, the job description emphasizes the importance of the writing process, the cognitive issues of paper writing, and the ability to listen to peers in order to help them develop ideas in a way that will effectively communicate purpose. It also states four basic responsibilities of a tutor:

- 1. Tutoring students, not editing papers.** Though this seems obvious, many students new to the role of tutoring do not distinguish between tutoring and editing. They fail to realize the interactive dimension of a good, productive tutoring session.
- 2. Writing conference summary forms clearly and concisely.** Objectively summarizing a session helps the tutor, tutee, and professor in thinking through the writer's needs, and also makes faculty aware that writing tutors are not editors.
- 3. Attending regular tutor seminars.** Seminar attendance is a requirement of employment because on-going tutor education improves tutoring and builds a stronger writing center. Though a credit-bearing class would be ideal, such a course is often difficult to get on the schedule for a fledgling writing center. Also, students who want to tutor usually are willing to participate in a regular tutoring seminar, but they do not want to take another class. Until a writing center has established a strong reputation with strong university and departmental support, a required course is difficult to institute and to enroll students in. Through these regular seminars, however, the peer tutors' skills improve, making them better and more confident in their work.
- 4. Being punctual about work and meetings, and reporting absences.** This point makes tutors aware of their responsibilities as adults and establishes more continuity in the writing center.

When students understand the responsibilities of a tutor and realize that they must go through a hiring process, they take the job more seriously. Having these mechanisms in place discourages the less committed students, but encourages the strong students who want to be part of this select group. Indeed, these potential tutors understand the opportunities that tutoring offers them: developing their writing skills, mentoring others, working with faculty, going to conferences, and earning professional skills that will build their resumes, especially for those interested in graduate and professional schools.

The required tutor application articulates six standards all potential tutors must meet in order to apply for employment at the Writing Center:

- 1. Sophomore, junior, or senior status with a GPA of 3.0 or higher.** By sophomore year, students who have taken composition classes and feel comfortable with the differences between high school and college composition usually have developed a greater maturity about writing as a process, critical thinking, idea development, and analysis. A GPA of 3.0 or higher suggests that the student is responsible and probably attends classes and completes required assignments with some distinction. If a student shows a great deal of aptitude in English and writing, but has struggled with other classes, such as math or physics classes, then waiving the requirement is reasonable, since math and physics classes wouldn't necessarily reflect her abilities to tutor writing.
- 2. Writing sample.** A formal essay written for a college level course shows the student's writing strengths and weaknesses and offers an opening for discussion in the interview.
- 3. Application letter.** The letter of application must address the reasons the student wants to be a tutor and must introduce the writing sample. This letter can be very revealing. Some students begin the letter with "Hi! This is Glenn and this is my letter of application . . .", whereas other students begin their letters with a standard salutation followed by a statement of their interest in tutoring. Obviously, their letters show variations in tone, levels of sophistication, writing styles, writing abilities, and communication. These letters along with the essays offer an opening to the interview discussion. The letters also make the application process more professional.

- 4. Application form.** This form covers contact information, educational background, work/tutoring experience, and references.
- 5. Interview.** During the interview, I ask questions that encourage the student to discuss her writing process, writing experiences, attitudes about writing, strengths and weaknesses. There are no “right” answers. The student’s answers, however, should show thoughtfulness, good general communication skills, a positive attitude about writing and learning more about writing, and a positive attitude about helping other people. I try to assess whether or not the student is “coachable” in the art of tutoring, and whether or not the student listens. Tutors must have good “active listening skills” (Rouse 2).
- 6. Strong ethical character and sense of responsibility.** Hiring tutors who will show up for work and who will care about the quality of their work is central to the success of a new writing center.

The objective hiring process encourages fewer but stronger applicants; supervision and standards give the writing center a better reputation on campus; bi-weekly seminars improve tutors’ skills and attitudes. Because of this hiring process, both students and tutors gain confidence in the writing center as a campus resource. Most importantly, students who become tutors discover quickly that working at the writing center is more than a way of making a few extra dollars on campus. Work at the writing center is about collaborative discourse, actively listening, critically thinking, and learning while teaching. Tutors discover that tutoring writing sharpens their academic, personal, and life skills; they soon realize their value within the larger social and intellectual community.

## 2. RECRUITMENT

Recruiting undergraduate students for a new writing center is an on-going challenge because, especially at smaller universities, the best students usually are the most involved in extra-curricular activities, leaving them with less time and inclination to work. Three strategies for raising interest in the writing center are a Web site, classroom visits, and writing workshops. A writing center Web site can explain the center’s purpose, offer writing tips, introduce the current tutors, list the open hours and events, and invite students to visit. Even a modest Web site works effectively with this Facebook generation of students because most prefer to explore campus and academic Web sites before using the related services. The classroom visits also offer a very basic way of disseminating information about the writing center; in the classroom, a tutor or director discusses writing center services and purpose. At my university, I send an announcement to all faculty members inviting them to have someone from the Writing Center come to their classroom. I schedule these visits during the first or last five minutes of class. These visits not only make the Writing Center more visible on campus but also clarify confusions about its purpose. When a writing center is new, some students and faculty feel that it is a grammar check or editing service that corrects citation methods. Both the Web site and classroom visits help to erase that myth. The last recruitment strategy, writing center workshops, not only is a myth buster but also can be a profile booster for the writing center. The writing center workshops should be open to all students and focus on various aspects of the writing process.

I have arranged a series of workshops that address a variety of writing issues: generating ideas and building a thesis, paragraphing and organization, introductions and conclusions, tone, and using sources. In each workshop, I integrate information about revising. Though I present the material in power point, I also integrate student activities. These workshops have led several students to inquire about the Writing Center, and more importantly, they have made the Writing Center a more popular place.

To recruit more aggressively, I use several venues to advertise tutoring positions: 1. a notice to faculty asking them to review their rosters and let me know about students who would make good tutors; 2. flyers in

*“The objective hiring process encourages fewer but stronger applicants; supervision and standards give the writing center a better reputation on campus. . . .”*

Human Resources and on job boards around campus; 3. an application on-line at the Writing Center Web page; and 4) an article for the university newspaper and the English Majors Newsletter. As the Honors Program Director, I also have the chance to review student records from the Honors Program and talk to these students individually about tutoring. Once students become aware of tutoring opportunities, they inquire. If a student shows the initiative to follow up on the hiring process, then she probably possesses the maturity and responsibility needed to be a reliable tutor.

### 3. FINANCES

Each university has its own methods for financing its writing center tutors, and a new writing center director has to learn to negotiate the defined boundaries. Several points are worth noting in regard to paying writing tutors. First, if tutors are hired on work-study through the Financial Aid Office, they still should be required to meet writing center standards as well as the work-study standards. The Financial Aid Office usually is more than willing to screen the first round of recruits based on the director's standards. If a qualified tutor is hired through work-study, the tutor's hours and pay must be carefully monitored because once a tutor earns all of the money in her work-study allotment, she will have to stop working. Depending on the number of tutors with work-study awards, a writing center could be very short staffed by spring midterm if hours are not carefully monitored.

The second point I discovered also related to Financial Aid work-study. Many excellent students who sought employment in the Writing Center did not qualify for work-study. Through many inquiries, I realized that after all students who receive work-study awards have been placed, students who want work-study but have not been given awards can be hired in positions that are still opened, if they apply through work-study. If a writing center is assigned ten openings through work-study and those openings remain after all other work-study student placements have been made, then the director may hire, through work-study, any other students who seek employment at the writing center. Though this method prolongs the hiring period at the start of the term, it may provide the writing center with several more tutors who are qualified.

The third discovery I made was the value of networking and pooling resources. If tutors are hired as part-time university employees, they have no problems with their financial aid packages, and the writing center director has greater freedom in recruiting students for writing center work. However, work-study payment is also a liability because the budget allotment and pay scale are not negotiable, and a modest, fixed budget supports only a limited number of tutors with limited working hours. So, the director might want to network to find further funds. Universities where athletic departments offer scholarships often also allocate money for tutoring athletes when coaches are concerned about their players' academic eligibility. Negotiating regular hours for Writing Center tutoring allowed me to hire several tutors through the Athletic Department at a better hourly wage rate than those on work-study. Those tutors worked specific hours that did not coincide with athletic practice and class schedules. The athletes could arrange standing appointments or could walk in. In that way, the tutors were available to the athletes as well as to other students. Though this option is only available at schools where athletic scholarships are given, it points out the value of networking and pooling resources in order to finance writing center projects. I also have learned more about grant writing, in order to fund activities such as the Writing Center Workshops.

These strategies are practical approaches to hiring reliable tutors in a fledgling writing center. Setting standards, putting them in print, and upholding them help students realize that being part of the writing center is a "real" job that requires responsibilities, skills, and knowledge. A professional hiring process also makes the larger university community aware of the status of the peer tutors. Overall, it improves student and faculty perceptions about the writing center. If a writing center operates with peer tutors, then the attitudes as well as the skills of the tutors become central to maintaining a good reputation. That good reputation may be invaluable in networking for finances as the writing center develops. Good tutor education is a huge part of creating a positive writing center environment, but before the tutoring seminar even starts, good hiring processes need to be put in place. A writing center director has to institute a long-term hiring system that will help with the recruitment and hiring of academically solid students who have a commitment not only to learning more about good writing but to sharing those skills with others. ♦

#### Work Cited

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## NUANCED COMMUNICATION IN A WRITING CENTER IN JAPAN

◆ *Scott Johnston and Masanori Ochitani*  
*Osaka Jogakuin College, Osaka, Japan*

Communication between people from different cultures has the potential for great learning or great misunderstanding—or something in between. The something in between is the focus of this article, drawing on communication between a Japanese and an American administering a writing center in Japan. People often assume that since they agree on a definition, they will avoid miscommunication. Yet, it is very difficult to explain one's working definitions of words because they are just that, only words. In the U.S., we often assume that the English definition of a word is the starting point of communication, but what if we start with foreign words and think of how native English speakers may interpret them. For example, how will Japanese concepts for words such as “restraint” and “senior in an organization” be interpreted and acted on? This article examines the two authors—one Japanese and one American—who were involved in administering a writing center in Japan and, in retrospect, how they describe their understandings of some concepts that pertained to their work when establishing this new center. As their discussion develops, nuanced differences emerge. In addition, this article considers how understanding these nuances might help writing center personnel think about interactions among tutors and students in a writing center.

### THE WRITING CENTER, OCHITANI, AND JOHNSTON

The writing center at Osaka Jogakuin College (OJC) has been open six days a week since April 2004. The writing center tutors work part-time and are native English instructors who have knowledge about the students, the curriculum, and EFL writing problems specific to OJC's students. As in any new writing center, numerous problems arose at the beginning that Ochitani and Johnston needed to address. Some of these were as follows: How to add staff during busy times? What would be the hours and how could these be changed? What would Osaka Jogakuin College Writing Center's work entail?

Masanori Ochitani, who at the time was Manager of the Educational Planning and Promotion Department, and Scott Johnston, who has been the Writing Center Coordinator since September 2004, had to handle these concerns, and it was only after they had solved the initial start-up questions that they had time to reflect on how their individual backgrounds and experiences influenced their cross-cultural interactions. Ochitani has worked in the area of higher education for about eighteen years, six of which have been at OJC. Johnston has extensive experience in Japan, having taught off and on in Japan for close to twelve years. While writing this article, Johnston was teaching an intercultural communication course, which had great influence on this research and the questions he asked Ochitani. For example, in his class, students compared the concepts of individualism and collectivism as well as direct and indirect ways of communicating. Students confirmed that they were often indirect in communicating ideas in order to avoid confrontation and maintain group harmony. These class discussions were the impetus for Johnston to hold interviews and talks with Ochitani about their views on their own communications about the Writing Center.

### COMMUNICATION AND MISCOMMUNICATION

Communication is the key to fruitful interactions. However, what is “effective” communication? William Gudykunst and Tsukasa Nishida discuss effective and ineffective communications and how messages can be miscommunicated, saying, “The message may not be transmitted in a way that can be understood, the message may be misinterpreted, or both can occur simultaneously” (12). According to these researchers, effective and ineffective communications seem to carry an either/or perspective. Joshua Hiller elaborates on the difference between misinterpretation and miscommunication with a Japanese

### WRITING CENTER DIRECTOR UNIVERSITY OF LOUISIANA

**Position:** at the rank of lecturer (non-tenure-track) or assistant professor (tenure-track), depending on qualifications, beginning Fall 2009.

**Duties:** Supervising the Writing Center and computer lab (including developing policies and procedures, hiring and training tutors, promotion), teaching undergraduate courses, and service (e.g., advising, departmental and university committees). For an assistant professor, continued publishing in field and work with M.A. and Ph.D. students.

**Qualifications:**

- \* Minimum of M.A. in English required, preferably in rhetoric and composition
- \* Writing center experience
- \* Teaching excellence
- \* Earned doctorate and record of scholarly activities and publications, for rank of assistant professor

**Salary:** competitive.

**Applications:** Candidates should initially provide a letter of application, a current curriculum vitae, and names and addresses of three references. Send to:

Professor James McDonald,  
Department Head  
Department of English, UL Lafayette  
P.O. Box 44691  
Lafayette, LA 70504-4691

A screening committee will begin reviewing applications as they arrive and will continue until the position is filled.

ESL student in a tutoring session he studied. Hiller suggests that misinterpretation is the “inability of two people to communicate due to linguistic barriers,” and miscommunication is “the inability to establish productive communication due to differences in cultural interpretation of the same or similar objects, events, or concepts” (10). In the session, Hiller realizes that it is not the English language that is a problem, but the Japanese Buddhist’s and his own concept of death that are very different. Hiller says, “To her, death and birth are interchangeable” (10). Language is not the problem. Obviously, this type of different cultural interpretation, if left unstated, will lead to miscommunication.

What about the type of nuanced miscommunication that falls between miscommunication and communication? This nuanced miscommunication is the type of communication that seemed to have occurred between Johnston and Ochitani. Since Johnston has lived in Japan for many years, both Ochitani and Johnston took for granted that Johnston and Ochitani had similar understandings of Japanese concepts. However, this turned out not to be true, and the two had nuanced differences. To highlight these nuanced understandings, two Japanese concepts important in their communications, *sempai/kobai* and *enryo*, are examined.

### SEMPAI AND KOHAI

For non-Japanese speakers, *sempai* and *kobai* need to be translated into English. *Sempai* means “seniors” and *kobai* means “juniors” (Nakane). These words have to do with ranking in Japanese society and how those older or with more time in an organization are to be respected. *Sempai* concerns the *sempai*’s responsibility to help a *kobai* in learning his/her job and supporting him/her at work. The *kobai*, in return, is expected to show respect and obedience to the *sempai*. Chie Nakane indicates that, “The ranking of *sempai* and *kobai* thus stifles the free expression of individual thought” (36), because a *kobai* may not question the ideas of a *sempai* due to the respect that needs to be shown. Ochitani was in two ways the *sempai* to Johnston as he was a few months older than Johnston and had been working at OJC longer. Johnston and Ochitani used *sempai/kobai* between them to cement their relationship, without the deeper cultural components of responsibility and support. Both used the words for greetings. Johnston would often say, “Good morning, *sempai*.” Before meeting to talk about an academic issue, Ochitani might say, “Ok, let’s talk about this, *kobai*.”

However, Johnston only used the word *sempai* to maintain their relationship. Indeed, he would have had trouble showing diffidence to Ochitani in the truly Japanese concept of the word because in Johnston’s mind, they were colleagues and not in a *sempai/kobai* relationship. In addition, since he was not raised in Japan where the *sempai/kobai* relationship is incubated over years, he most likely could not have enacted his role correctly. Thus, Johnston did not even attempt to take the traditional role of *kobai*. Because of his background, he would have found it extremely difficult to not try to clearly express his ideas. Ochitani agreed that Johnston probably could not take on the traditional role of *kobai*, saying, “Between us, it is a joke but also communication. It builds our relationship; it is our joke.” He did not think they had a Japanese *sempai/kobai* relationship. Ochitani thought it would be difficult for Johnston to show appropriate respect in a Japanese *sempai/kobai* relationship and to refrain from questioning Ochitani’s ideas, since Johnston was raised outside of Japan. If Johnston did act according to Ochitani’s conception of the *sempai/kobai* concept, then Johnston would have been more likely to refrain from putting forward his ideas, making suggestions about the Writing Center, or much less disagreeing with Ochitani. Ochitani pointed out that he was glad that Johnston did not act in the traditional Japanese role of *kobai* because the implementation of the Writing Center needed someone with creative ideas.

One aspect of the *sempai/kobai* relationship that will prove important in writing center tutoring sessions is the power relationships (Hofstede). Japanese students will show respect to a tutor who is viewed as higher in power and/or age. This may result in students refraining from visiting a writing

center, students nodding their heads in agreement during a session when they do not understand a tutor's comments, or students not asking for elaboration even when they do not understand. Tutors may suggest that students just ask questions and not worry about feeling embarrassed. However, as we saw with Johnston and his *sempai/kobai* thinking, behaviors and ways of thinking developed over the years are rather resilient to change. Saying "Just ask" is not enough. Closely linked to the *sempai/kobai* concept is *enryo*, another Japanese concept having to do with refraining from asking or expressing ideas.

## ENRYO

At the end of the semester in July 2005, when the Writing Center was extremely busy, Johnston asked Ochitani about adding additional staff. Ochitani replied that it was fine to have other tutors work, but Johnston would have to approach the full-time instructors. Thus, in order to have more staff available during the busy times, Johnston asked other tutors, who would be paid, as well as several full-time instructors, who would not be paid for working in the Writing Center. Full-time native English instructors, including Johnston, covered two of the days, while tutors added hours on the other days. In the interview, which was four months later, Ochitani stated that he could not have asked the full-time instructors to work in the Writing Center because OJC would not have paid them. If he asked, it would have been viewed as part of their responsibilities and would have only added a burden on their already busy schedules of teaching and committee work. Ochitani thought it might be difficult for them to refuse him, so he could not ask. In addition, the office already requests full-time instructors to do many other activities when he cannot use *enryo*, so he felt this was a situation in which he needed to avoid asking directly for assistance.

*Enryo*, according to Takie Sugiyama Lebra, is part of conforming to the group and refraining from expressing ideas (125). Lebra adds, "Thus the virtue of *enryo*, 'self-restraint,' is exercised not only to respond to group pressure for conformity but to avoid causing displeasure for others, regardless of their group membership" (41). Ochitani said that Johnston could ask full-time teachers to volunteer because it would be the Writing Center Coordinator and not the OJC office. Ochitani had to restrain himself from requesting full-time teachers to volunteer even though additional tutors were needed to help the students. As he said earlier, it would have put too much of a burden on the instructors, and they might have found it hard to say no.

In another case, Ochitani had to ask a teacher to work, and he could not refrain. He said, "A phonetics teacher took maternity leave, and I had no choice but to ask a full-time teacher to fill-in. There was no other choice, so I had to ask her. I could not be restrained." He used the word, *mochiwakenai*, which means "I was very sorry to bother her." One more case highlights the importance of relationships and *enryo*. Another teacher had to leave in the middle of the semester, and an instructor had to be found as a replacement. In this situation, the new instructor was not currently teaching at OJC, so Ochitani said that he did not have to worry about *enryo*. The instructor was outside his sphere of *enryo*. Johnston's view of *enryo* was a bit different. To Johnston, asking full-time teachers to work in the Writing Center was natural, not a restraint. In his view, more tutors would have benefited the students, so to him, it was common sense to ask full-time instructors. Indeed, in the e-mail to full-time instructors, he made it quite clear that it was voluntary and that the instructors did not need to help in the Writing Center. Thus, Johnston was not restrained by the concept of *enryo* as was Ochitani. Johnston expected the instructors to say "no" if it was inconvenient. Thus, Johnston's and Ochitani's views of *enryo* encompassed a nuanced difference. Both defined *enryo* as restraint, but Johnston could not think of a case where he would have to restrain himself. Rather, he would leave it up to the other person to say "no." In contrast, Ochitani's view of *enryo* is much more complex and even difficult for him to explain. While both included the idea of not inconveniencing others, Ochitani seemed to feel a restraint in order not to put a person in a difficult decision-making situation. *Enryo* will also

## TAKE NOTE

### NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PEER TUTORING IN WRITING

November 6-8, 2009  
South Hadley, MA

The upcoming NCPTW conference will be hosted by Mount Holyoke College. More information and the call for proposals will be available soon! The NCPTW Web site, <<http://www.ncptw.org>>, will be updated with the appropriate information for that conference once it becomes available.

occur in a writing center between the tutor and student. For example, in our writing center, students may not complain about noise made by other students talking, tutors going over the session time with a student, or students' lack of privacy in sessions. They may feel restrained to talk about these issues with tutors because of the role of *enryo*.

### NUANCED UNDERSTANDING

Ochitani and Johnston had nuanced differences in their understandings of the Japanese concepts of *sempai/kobai* and *enryo*. Communication occurred between them; however, the nuanced differences might be seeds for miscommunication in the future. In the future, Ochitani might not communicate a problem in the Writing Center due to *enryo*. Thus, Johnston might never know about Ochitani's discomfort. Similarly, since Johnston holds such a simplistic view of *enryo*, there are times when he may feel that Ochitani is restraining himself too much. For example, in the future, Johnston might ask to include some Japanese tutors in the writing center, and the answer might be prolonged due to *enryo* because Ochitani may not want to disappoint Johnston with a negative reply. In addition, miscommunication between students and tutors could arise. *Enryo* and the aspect of *sempai/kobai* involving the show of respect to instructors, older individuals, and people in higher positions will be important. Showing respect and *enryo* have to do with not acting or talking, so tutors may have difficulty knowing what they missed. Students may not be asking questions, probing for detail, or even going to the Writing Center. They will not be able to approach tutors or instructors, as their behaviors are tied to their cultural backgrounds.

This nuanced communication at OJC's Writing Center is less related to language and more connected to differences in understandings of cultural concepts. While this article describes the differences between a Japanese and an American, cultural differences related to other factors such as gender and age arise in writing centers everywhere. Though more cultural and linguistic knowledge may reduce miscommunication (Gudykunst and Nishida), with some limited knowledge of other cultures, we may risk assuming that we "understand" others' cultures and values and that there is mutual understanding when the nuanced views most likely are different (Johnston). What is particularly interesting is that both Johnston and Ochitani did not realize that they operated under this nuanced miscommunication until the research interviews began and both talked about their understandings of the Japanese concepts of *sempai/kobai* and *enryo*. It was only through asking questions that Johnston and Ochitani became aware of how underdeveloped Johnston's Japanese concepts were and how complex Ochitani's were. In conclusion, all of us interact with culturally different students and need to be aware of how concepts and views may be quite different. In addition, this research once again highlights the need for deeper dialogue between people and more probing questions inside and outside of writing centers (Hiller). Like Johnston, someone with many years of living and working in Japan, we all need to avoid becoming complacent in thinking that we understand the intended messages being sent by the other person. Being aware of these differences is one step towards reducing miscommunication or nuanced miscommunication. ♦

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## WHOSE SPACE IS IT ANYWAY? A NEW WRITING CENTER ADMINISTRATOR'S REFLECTION ON NEGOTIATING SPACE

◆ *Ali Mageebon*

*New Mexico State University—Alamogordo  
Alamogordo, NM*

Before I became the Mary Virginia Brown Writing Center Coordinator in 2006 at New Mexico State University—Alamogordo, I had not thought much about what goes into directing a writing center. I had previously tutored in a writing center and worked in a managerial capacity as chair of an English department. While both provided good experience in the pedagogy of composition and the theory of writing centers, neither adequately prepared me for the first issue I encountered: the nature of space and a writing center. Initially I was an interloper in the space because I was the first center director in several years who felt it was important to spend consistent periods of time in the Writing Center. Negotiating with the tutors to establish my own space became my first priority as it was essential that the tutors and I work toward creating a collaborative environment for ourselves and our students. This article will consider the concept of space in terms of my place within the space of the Writing Center, the theory of a writing center and its space on a college or university campus, tutor and student use of space within our Writing Center, and ways in which my tutors and I have created a collaborative learning environment.

### MY SPACE

My first efforts to become a member of the Writing Center space consisted of working Writing Center office hours into my schedule and taking over some space on the bulletin board by the front desk to post my schedule, including class times and regular office hours. My first dilemma, however, was where to locate myself within an already overcrowded room. The Writing Center was an approximately 800-square-foot room, with a smaller room inside the Center walled off for placement testing. Furniture, including three filing cabinets, four bookshelves, four round tables and a desk, filled the remaining space.

When testing was not scheduled, I often sat at a computer in the small testing room. However, the lack of privacy was a challenge because students often came into the room to take tests or work on the computers. The tutoring space itself was not a suitable place, as the area needed to be reserved for students. Often, I'd sit in one of the chairs by the door, particularly when it wasn't busy, and talk to tutors. Sitting at the front desk was not a useful strategy because I would become the Writing Center's receptionist. I also found it awkward to work at this space when students were waiting for a tutor to become available, as the students did not understand my relationship to the space. My hours in the Writing Center quickly gave way to more productive attempts to reconfigure the space between the tutors and me.

In re-thinking how I might become part of our Writing Center space, I turned to the literature to consider where writing centers belong on a campus and to understand how writing center directors exist within that space. Writing centers are academic entities located in many places, as part of an organizational chart, within a physical locale, and within the pedagogical framework of higher education. Writing centers have been organizationally housed within academic support or learning centers (indeed, ours is about to move to such a space), English departments, and colleges or branches of institutions whose purpose is student success (generally such centers are closely aligned with the business of remediation and adult basic education). In terms of physical locale, writing centers are placed in classrooms, in their own buildings (often with other support services either related or unrelated to student tutoring), and in libraries. Pedagogically, writing centers are

## TAKE NOTE

### STATE OF ARIZONA WRITING CENTERS SYMPOSIUM

February 7, 2009  
Phoenix, AZ  
University Center—ASU  
Downtown  
Featured Speaker: Clint Gardner

The Symposium, sponsored by the ASU Writing Centers of University Academic Success Programs, invites our Arizona writing center colleagues to discuss meeting the needs of student writers and enhancing our tutoring centers. The conference will feature Clint Gardner, Director of the Writing Center at Salt Lake Community College, and a series of roundtable open discussions. Lunch will be provided.

Registration: <<http://studentsuccess.asu.edu/rsvp/>>.

Contact: Jeanne Simpson: [Jeanne.simpson@asu.edu](mailto:Jeanne.simpson@asu.edu)

found in places in which teaching is intended to be collaborative and where students discover how to make meaning as writers using the writing process (Leahy).

My writing center is located in an off-shoot of the classroom buildings on our small campus with 2,000 students, across from the campus business center and adjacent to an eighteen-computer classroom lab used by developmental and technical writing courses. We are connected to the campus, but still separate from the activities of the classrooms and student services. We are administratively housed in the English department, though our most direct line of administrative supervision comes from the Humanities and Social Sciences division head. Pedagogically, we hold firmly to North's statement that "in a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction" (37). Such a position is reinforced by the tutoring handbook, our orientation for students at the beginning of each semester, and our training sessions and monthly meetings.

The Writing Center employs ten or eleven tutors each semester. However, only two or three tutors are on duty at a time. We are open forty-five hours per week, (Monday through Thursday for ten hours per day and Saturdays for five hours). All the tutors are at least high school graduates, and most have a bachelor's or master's degree in English or a related field (history, creative writing, etc.) Tutors remain in the writing center when they aren't with a student, often using the computers in the small testing room when no students are present, working at the computer at the front desk, or sitting at one of the tables in the room.

### THE TUTORS AND THEIR SPACE

The tutors utilize all of the space in the Writing Center. Though the space ostensibly belongs to the students we serve, the tutors are the ones who spend the most time in the space (with the possible exception of our "regulars" – students who spend two or more hours per week in the writing center.) During a training session last semester, I distributed a questionnaire to my tutors, asking them to reflect on our space and the changes since I became the director. Though only four of the ten tutors responded, it is interesting to note each one mentioned how the space on the walls in our area has changed for the better. We now have four bulletin boards: a large one that displays different writing-oriented issues each month; a small one on which we post business matters (my schedule, the tutors' schedule, the school calendar); a second small one maintained by a tutor who posts the word of the day on it; and a final bulletin board with tutor photos and biographies. The tutors also mentioned our display of student art, as well as a bookshelf with free books on it for students and tutors (donated by the tutors and me). They recognize these efforts are intended to make the space friendlier for students by providing interesting information about writing skills and by making the space more attractive.

How tutors use the space available to them when working with students is important, so I have instituted changes to make the space more friendly, collaborative, and functional. If a tutor sits across from the student at one of the tables, this division of space establishes a distance between student and tutor which I discourage. I much prefer the tutor and student sit side-by-side, so the student understands the tutor is a collaborator in the writing process. Additionally, I have asked that one tutor remain in the front space to greet students or answer student questions instead of spending time in the space behind the filing cabinets or in the small testing room during times they were not working with students. Similarly, we have added two computers to our space behind the filing cabinets, and tutors spend much time working side-by-side with students at the computers to assist them with assignments.

### STUDENTS AND THE SPACE

Two distinct groups of students come to our Writing Center, and both occupy the space in different ways. First there are students who drop in infrequently during a semester (two, three, four times) and

address immediate writing concerns with a tutor. Such sessions mean the student only occupies the space for a brief period of time. The second group consists of students who come to the Writing Center for two hours or more per week. This latter group makes the space of the Center their own by placing their bags and books in one space, generally a table they return to every time, making use of the available resources through both independent learning and tutor assistance. This group of students is most likely to develop a relationship with a specific tutor or several tutors.

The students of the second group, those who have made the space their own, have contributed to the perception that the Writing Center is a place of community, an important change. Additionally, many of our regular students attend classes together and come in for tutoring at the same time, which occasionally results in group tutoring sessions, further reinforcing a sense of belonging and comfort. However, we continue to face the challenge of making our space welcoming to students. As one tutor remarked in her response to the space survey: "Some students say the space is confining; they are distracted with the interruptions of other walk-ins, setting up of [placement] testers, and phone calls." Hadfield, et al., in their essay on redesigning writing centers, advocate having student involvement in designing new spaces for writing centers. Certainly, we will solicit feedback from students to make the space more inviting.

## BACK TO ME AND MY SPACE

As a solution to my initial concerns about how to negotiate space with my tutors, I returned to my office and explored other ways of communicating with the tutors, including a weekly memo in which I asked tutors for specific suggestions, reminded them about upcoming training sessions, and addressed general business. I established mailboxes in the Writing Center for the tutors so they could communicate with me more easily. I revised the tutoring manual, which had last been updated in 1995. I quickly found I was spending quite a bit of time in the writing center, but my entry into the space came in brief periods of time throughout the day.

Within the first semester, I instituted monthly training sessions to help tutors with topics and issues about which they wanted to learn. The monthly training sessions achieved two things. First, the tutors quickly gained skills in specific tutoring areas (including tutoring reading, working with English as Second Language students, and tutoring students with disabilities). Second, the training sessions allowed all the tutors to meet at the same time, something that had previously only happened once a year. We could then begin to discuss what our space would look like.

I began to understand the relationship between tutors and a writing center coordinator or director as an invitation. The tutors invited me into their space by sitting down and talking to me, sharing parts of their lives during the many informal times I dropped by the Center. They invited me into their relationships with their students by asking me questions to help students negotiate the campus system. I have invited the tutors into my vision and conception of what a writing center should be through the following:

- Requesting that tutors be paid as aides in the developmental writing labs. The tutors work for two hours per week in our designated lab times, assisting students and finding out more about the teaching side of the job. Subsequently, two of my tutors have been invited to work as part-time developmental writing teachers at our institution because of the work they have done when sharing my space.
- Inviting tutors to observe my classes during regular class time and sharing my assignments.
- Finding ways to incorporate my tutors' many talents into the space and work of the Writing Center. Tutors have worked on projects ranging from finding new resources for our Center,

## TAKE NOTE

### NORTHERN CALIFORNIA WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Call for Proposals  
Saturday, February 28, 2009.  
8 a.m.—8 p.m.

Gilroy, CA

*“Awakening the Writer Within:  
Connecting Brains, Bodies and  
Environments”*

Contact Person: Kimberly Smith, Gavilan  
Community College, California. Deadline  
for call for proposals: January 2, 2009. E-  
mail proposal to [ksmith@gavilan.edu](mailto:ksmith@gavilan.edu). For  
more proposal information, please see the  
conference Web site: [http://www.gavilan.  
edu/writing/NCWCAConference2009.  
html](http://www.gavilan.edu/writing/NCWCAConference2009.html).

working with our art department to arrange to have student art showcased in the Center, designing monthly displays for our bulletin board, organizing and keeping track of our books, organizing a poetry reading for the campus community each semester, and planning tutor-led training sessions.

- Sharing my philosophy of both teaching and tutoring with my tutors during our monthly meeting and training sessions.

I now feel the tutors have been more willing to invite me to be their leader and guide. Events which began fairly confrontational (such as observing tutoring sessions) are now part of our regular routine. My tutors seek my presence and invite me to observe or discuss how tutoring sessions went with particular students.

### CONCLUSION

What do configuration of space, use of space, and negotiation of space all say about the job we do as writing center professionals? How does the space reflect upon or reflect the pedagogy as well as the place of a writing center in a college campus? As a new director, I have found it very useful to work with my tutors to negotiate the space in a way that allows them to continue to do their job and still allows me access to the space so I can explain, and sometimes defend, the ways in which tutors do their jobs. One of my most important tasks as the Writing Center director is to find ways to make sure we are included within the space of the campus (physically and philosophically) and to be sure it is understood we provide a valuable service to the students, who in turn must be encouraged to consider the space theirs. ♦

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## THE WRITING CENTERS RESEARCH PROJECT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

◆ Carol Mattingly  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, KY

As writing centers nationwide reach a new level of professionalism and proliferation, the need to document the history of our field, as well as to establish comprehensive demographic data, becomes essential. To this end, the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) conducts and supports research on writing center theory and practice and maintains a repository of historical, empirical, and academic materials for scholarly research. The Project also maintains and makes available the most comprehensive mailing list of writing centers to date.

### ORAL HISTORIES

The WCRP archives oral interviews with historically significant writing center professionals, including those instrumental in founding early centers, in developing the National Writing Centers Association, and in contributing to the development of writing center studies in other important ways. The interviews are housed at the University of Louisville archives in both audiotaped and transcribed versions.

### INTERNATIONAL SURVEY AND CURRENT SURVEY

The WCRP international survey establishes benchmark information about writing centers, is updated regularly, and is available to members of the writing center community for use in planning and assessment. If you have not yet completed the current WCRP survey, go to <[http://coldfusion.louisville.edu/webs/as/wcrp/surveyentry/select\\_school.cfm?action=survey](http://coldfusion.louisville.edu/webs/as/wcrp/surveyentry/select_school.cfm?action=survey)>. Nearly 200 fewer directors have responded to the 2008 survey than in 2006. Your response is essential if we are to have accurate information for writing centers. We have extended the deadline to the end of the semester. After that, we'll be moving the server and won't be able to take more replies.

### ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

The WCRP has established an archive of spoken memories and written records in order to preserve writing center history and facilitate scholarly research. We are currently collecting local, regional, and national writing center materials dating from pre-1995. We have begun interviewing those instrumental in creating and directing early writing centers as well as those active in regional and national organizations and prominent in early publications on writing centers. In our effort to create a complete archive of written materials, we invite donations for the archival collections:

- Out-of-print books and dissertations.
- One-of-a-kind materials related to individual writing centers before 1990.
- Other materials: Grant proposals, reports, writing center handbooks, training materials, surveys and studies, minutes, constitutions, annual reports, mission statements, flyers, bookmarks, workshop descriptions, handouts, schedules, taped conferences, notices to faculty, materials related to relocation of facilities, records pertaining to creation of a writing center and policy changes regarding its management, memorabilia and photographs related to center identity and student activities, materials associated with national and regional organizations, records and memorabilia listed above that pertain to regional and national organizations, and regional and national conference programs.

Before you discard records and memorabilia related to your writing center's history, please visit our Web site at <[www.wcrp.louisville.edu/](http://www.wcrp.louisville.edu/)> or contact me at [j.mattingly@louisville.edu](mailto:j.mattingly@louisville.edu). In the coming year, Allison Holland will be the director. ◆

## TAKE NOTE

### MIDWEST WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Call for Proposals  
October 22-24, 2009  
Rapid City, SD

Proposals will undergo blind review and should be submitted using the online proposal form at the conference Web site <<http://pages.usiouxfalls.edu/mwca/conference>>. The form provides great latitude in session format, duration, and content, but proposals should be as specific as possible about the role of the presenters, the participation of others in attendance, and the contribution the session makes to writing center studies. For annotated samples of successful proposals from previous conferences, see the Model Proposal page on the MWCA website at <<http://pages.usiouxfalls.edu/mwca/>>. Deadline for proposals: Friday, March 20, 2009.

Questions about the call for papers may be directed to Christopher Ervin ([cervin@usd.edu](mailto:cervin@usd.edu)) or Greg Dyer ([greg.dyer@usiouxfalls.edu](mailto:greg.dyer@usiouxfalls.edu)).

## TUTOR'S COLUMN

### LIFE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO'S ARTS AND SCIENCES ENGLISH WRITING CENTER

♦ María del C. Quintero Aguiló  
University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez  
Mayagüez, PR

The Renaissance individual knew or wanted to know it all with focus placed in diversity; a well-rounded university should strive for the same goal. The University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez specializes in many fields ranging from art theory to nursing to civil engineering. The *Colegio*, as it is popularly called, located on the west end of the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico, promises to launch into the career world fully bilingual professionals. Because Puerto Rico shares a commonwealth relationship with the United States, the English language is the second language of our students and is taught K-12. English courses are a university requirement without departmental exceptions.

Still, many students have certain difficulties in their English courses. Their K-12 educations vary in the emphasis placed on learning English, and here at *Colegio*, professors have, unfortunately, overcrowded classrooms. This situation does not provide any opportunity for personalized English lessons to address the particular needs of all students. As a result, the Department of English, in Spring 2005, decided to help alleviate the matter by creating the Arts and Sciences Writing Center. The Center helps every student who needs help in any topic concerning English—whether reading, writing, listening, or speaking. Students from all fields go for support, guidance, and tutoring sessions by a trained staff. The Writing Center peer tutors are both graduate and undergraduate students with a special interest in the English language.

Being the graduate student ethnographer of the Writing Center gave me the opportunity to become an observer, analyst, historian, psychologist, and anthropologist. I studied the ambiance, the trends, the problems, the patterns, and the joys (and tears) at the Center. I took minutes of our weekly staff meetings. Because all of our tutors had already gone through one semester of training, in these meetings the group of tutors got together and discussed their most notable experiences, problems, and questions that arose during the week.

#### LIFE, STRIFE, AND SUCCESS AT THE CENTER

It is clear that being a tutor is not an easy task, especially if English is the most dreaded word for Puerto Rican students. The island's socio-political status has deeply instilled a series of biased presuppositions towards the English language and its 'colonizing role.' As a result, the Writing Center has to exist in a country where English is not the subject of choice. It takes patience, dedication, focus, energy, and often sacrifice as tutors learn that while they themselves know much, their job is not necessarily to impart this knowledge, but rather to ask the students questions. The characteristics that we possess may not be always present every time a student walks in asking for help. Overall, the tutors have shown great responsibility and determination in not letting the students down when they come in for support. Issues related to this never pose a problem; on the contrary, the staff always has a smile. No student has ever expressed a concern with the attitude of a particular tutor. Questionnaires given to students confirm this.

Instead of students having a hard time with the tutors, because the idea of being tutored was new to our campus, the result was the other way around. Many tutors had problems with the students' behavior at the Center, and surprisingly it had nothing to do with the fact that we were an English tutoring center. Many students believed that we were there to fix or edit their papers and got upset when a tutor told them that he or she was there as a guide, not to do the work for them. We had to be very careful in explaining our role. The majority of students regarded the tutors as the surrogate professor who could provide personalized "me time," and for this they were most grateful.

This goes to show that perhaps students are moving away from the old anti-English attitudes so popular in the island's universities during prior decades and are now regarding English as just another language, not the colonizing enemy.

Many times students tended to show up at the Center an hour or less before a paper was due, expecting the tutor to immediately help them. They did not consider the fact that the tutoring session could last more than fifteen minutes or that the Center might be full and they would have to wait for a turn. These problems were not unexpected, as our Writing Center is the first of its kind on the island of Puerto Rico and the first of its kind in the University of Puerto Rico's multi-campus system.

#### THE TUTORS' POINT OF VIEW

The toughest pattern for tutors to get rid of was writing on students' papers. Many times tutors had too many students waiting for help and found it quicker to point directly at their mistakes, dispatching a student who had not actively learned. This habit was hard to eradicate, but eventually it worked out. The tutors had to remember that students' papers were theirs, and tutors had no right to invade their work. The problem ended up being more of a product of laziness than of a language gap. We have not yet discovered any direct connection between writing on students' papers and the ESL environment. Every time a student was helped, we filled out a sheet where we meditated on the effectiveness of the session and what aspects caught our attention. Ultimately, the results were very useful. One by one we would get all the glitches.

The time appointed for each session was another concern. In general, a tutorial is supposed to last thirty minutes. There were cases in which they lasted longer, which is understandable because our students are described as ESL. We would first greet students and address their papers in Spanish, thus explaining English *through* Spanish. The process of tutoring in Spanish while dealing with English seems to be the best way to tutor in such an environment.

Finally, the toughest time that tutors had was in the "war" between HOCs (Higher Order Concerns) and LOCs (Later Order Concerns), content versus grammar. Spanish is the first language of most students, English being their second. Tutors found themselves in the borderland between what the Center thought was more crucial for a paper and what some professors claimed to be a good paper. In these cases, we follow the teacher's orders and then focus on content. Still, the tutoring sheets showed the evidence that many tutors only looked at grammar in the sessions. This was the biggest bump in the Writing Center's road. But what are tutors of English to do in our unique bilingual situation? The staff from the Center realized that there should not be one approach, rather each session merited a different treatment. The Center has grown, and with maturity comes improvement. The bilingual situation has also become more hassle free. The Writing Center has tutors whose first language and sole language is English, and students often find themselves searching for those tutors they can practice English with as a challenge, without the aid of a *lingua franca* between them.

#### CONCLUSION

From our experience last spring semester, we concluded our center should broaden its horizons, continue to advertise that we serve the entire campus, request funding to hire more tutors, and compel the administration to provide us with a larger space. As with all institutions and entities in which groups of people are working as a team, interesting outcomes arise. The excitement, motivation, and determination of the staff at the new Arts and Sciences Writing Center at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez shall overcome any difficulties that have come up. As long as students—and faculty—value our support, there is no stopping the Writing Center. ♦

# CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

**February 7, 2009:** Arizona Writing Centers Symposium, in Phoenix, AZ

**Contact:** Jeanne Simpson: Jeanne.simpson@asu.edu; Registration Web site: <<http://studentsuccess.asu.edu/rsvp/>>.

**February 19-20, 2009:** Middle East—North Africa Writing Centers Alliance, in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates

**Contact:** MENWCA newsletter link on the Web site: <<http://tcc.qatar.tamu.edu/symposium.aspx>>.

**February 21, 2009:** Southern California Writing Centers Conference, in Moorpark, CA

**Contact:** Kathryn Adams: kadams@vcccd.edu; 805-378-1400, x 1696.

**February 26-28, 2009:** Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Greensboro, NC

**Contact:** Hope Jackson, SWCA Chairperson: 336-334-7764; jacksonw@ncat.edu;

Conference Web site: <[cas.ncat.edu/~swca](http://cas.ncat.edu/~swca)>.

**February 28, 2009:** Northern California Writing Centers Association, in Gilroy, CA

**Contact:** Natasha Oehlman: natasha\_oehlman@csumb.edu; 831-582-4614 or Kimberly Smith: ksmith@gavilan.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://www.gavilan.edu/writing/NCWCAConference2009.html>>.

**March 27-28, 2009:** Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in York, PA

**Contact:** Cynthia Crimmins (crimmin@ycp.edu) or Dominic Delli Carpini (dcarpini@ycp.edu). Conference Web site: <[www.ycp.edu/lrc/mawca2009](http://www.ycp.edu/lrc/mawca2009)>.

**April 2-4, 2009:** South Central Writing Centers Association, in Georgetown, TX

**Contact:** Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton (piedmone@southwestern.edu) and Cole Bennett (bcb00b@acu.edu).

**April 3-4, 2009:** East Central Writing Centers Association, in West Lafayette, IN

**Contact:** Linda Bergmann (lbergmann@purdue.edu) or Tammy Conard-Salvo (tc-salvo@purdue.edu). Conference Web site: <<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/ecwca>>.

**April 4-5, 2009:** Northeast Writing Centers Association, in Hartford, CT

**Contact:** Katherine Tirabassi; 603-358-2924; e-mail: ktirabassi@keene.edu.

**April 17-18, 2009:** Pacific Northwest Writing Centers Association, in Ellensburg, WA

**Contact:** Teresa Joy Kramer; kramert@cwu.edu. Conference Web site: <<http://www.pnwca.org>>.

**October 22-24, 2009:** Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Rapid City, SD

**Contact:** Christopher Ervin (cervin@usd.edu) or Greg Dyer (greg.dyer@usiouxfalls.edu).



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