

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 36, Number 3-4

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

Nov./Dec., 2011

– FROM THE EDITOR –

This issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* focuses on tutors from a variety of perspectives. Jennifer Jefferson begins the discussion as she offers tutors insights on working with students who bring in drafts of surveys or interview questions. While Jefferson highlights the tutor's role as audience, Rita Malenczyk and Lauren Rosenberg share insights on the roles of tutors serving as adjuncts in the classroom. Here tutors work not only with students but also with instructors, especially in faculty development workshops. The interaction with teachers leads Malenczyk and Rosenberg to conclude that tutors and instructors work collaboratively to create knowledge.

But what happens when a tutor sees himself conflicted as to whether he should follow the instructor's comments about revising when helping the student? Eric Sentell reflects on such a situation when he senses he is stifling a student by engaging in the instructor's recommended agenda for revision. Finally, Joshua Thompson shows us how he draws on his experiences in band camp in order to help himself understand his work in the writing center. In the process, he also becomes a more confident writing tutor.

These articles are an affirmation once again of how complex tutoring is, of how varied tutors' roles are as they traverse that middle ground between instructors and students and as they negotiate among potentially conflicting goals of tutoring and learning.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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TUTORING SURVEY AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: A TANGIBLE LESSON IN AUDIENCE

◆ Jennifer Jefferson

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Two of the more common genres we see in the Endicott College Writing Center each spring are survey and interview questions. These questions come in from our seniors, who all complete a two-semester thesis: in the first semester they undertake library research and write a literature review; in the second semester they conduct primary research on a closely related topic. During that second semester seniors bring the writing tutors sets of survey and interview questions. Just as seniors who have acclimated to the genre of the academic essay and may have developed a certain facility with it can again be novices when encountering these assignments, so too can tutors find such situations challenging.

Many useful guidelines for composing effective survey and interview questions exist, but they don't put this information into the context of tutoring these genres in a writing center. Where is a tutor who is used to helping with the traditional academic paper supposed to begin? After briefly reviewing the genre expectations, this article will discuss how looking at surveys and interviews through the lens of

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Manuscripts: Before sending in submissions, please consult the guidelines on the *WLN* website. Recommended length for articles is approximately 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutor's Column essays, in MLA format. Please send as attached files in an e-mail to submission@writinglabnewsletter.org.

audience offers a perspective that both tutors and students can take to their broader work with all writing.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS

Writing advice for surveys and interviews frequently stresses brevity, ease of understanding, appropriate type(s) of questions, and neutrality/lack of bias. For surveys, the guidelines specifically emphasize clarity and brevity. Dana Lynn Driscoll and Allen Brizee, in their Purdue OWL article "Creating Good Interview and Survey Questions," mention "confusing or wordy questions" and "questions that do not relate to what you want to learn" as potential problems for writers. They explain, "confusing questions will only lead to confused participants, which leads to unreliable answers." Walter E. Oliu, Charles T. Brusaw, and Gerald J. Alred, in *Writing That Works: Communicating Effectively on the Job*, similarly urge writers to make questions "easy to understand" (153). They explain, "a confusing question will yield confusing results, whereas a carefully worded question will be easy to answer" (153). They also advise, "keep it [the questionnaire] as brief as possible" (153). Oliu, Brusaw, and Alred claim that the survey answers that "require minimum effort on the part of the respondent . . . increas[e] your chances of obtaining a response" (153). Mike Markel, in *Technical Communication*, helpfully details the many types of survey questions—from multiple choice and Likert scale to short answer and essay—that writers may use to collect information (119). Note an emphasis for all of these authors on the goal of obtaining information from an audience.

While the survey guidelines emphasize clarity and brevity, interview guidelines advise clarity and openness. The goal is to facilitate conversation, but productive and directed conversation. Markel tells us that "good [interview] questions are clear, focused, and open" (115). Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, in *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research*, explain that both closed-ended and open-ended questions are often useful in an interview, but that the latter help the conversation along: "*Open questions* . . . help elicit your informant's perspective and allow for more conversational exchange" (239, emphasis original). They also note that for interviews there's "an ironic contradiction: you must be both structured and flexible at the same time" (238). Oliu, Brusaw, and Alred similarly advise, "ask specific but open-ended questions"; they also suggest, "be flexible" (151). As with surveys, the goal is to gain information from the audience. The means of getting that information, however, and the type of information collected, can differ.

For both genres, the experts emphasize the need for neutrality. Driscoll and Brizee warn against "biased questions" and "questions that assume what they ask." Markel similarly instructs writers of surveys to "use unbiased language" and "be specific" (118). Oliu, Brusaw, and Alred assert that an interviewer should "be objective" (151), and that for surveys, "questions should be neutral" (154). With regard to surveys, they further counsel, "wording should not lead respondents to give a particular answer, which can result in inaccurate or skewed data" (154). Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater, writing about interviews, note, "it is our job to reveal our informant's perspectives and experiences rather than our own" (239). Further, if the writer doesn't provide a needed category of response (such as "maybe," or "not applicable"), the respondent may be forced to choose a response that doesn't accurately reflect his or her feelings or experiences. Tutor awareness of these general guidelines, when coupled with a focus on audience, can do much to point writers in a productive direction.

THE AUDIENCE ROLES OF THE TUTOR

As with the academic essay, when students bring their survey or interview questions to a writing center, they are testing them out on an audience. Consider some of the types of survey and interview situations students who visit our center may be working on:

- 1) A hospitality management student surveys and/or interviews hotel managers about a new trend in the field.

- 2) An athletic training student surveys and/or interviews high school coaches about effective warm-up practices in different sports.
- 3) A business student surveys and/or interviews consumers about the qualities they look for in inexpensive technology products.
- 4) A criminal justice student surveys and/or interviews local residents about the effectiveness of a recently implemented town safety program.

In each of these situations, the tutor plays a role as a different type of reader. In *Motives for Metaphor: Literacy, Curriculum Reform, and the Teaching of English*, James Seitz explores how writing pedagogy uses the idea of role playing. Explaining the work of Judith and Geoffrey Summerfield, who emphasize an important distinction between acting and role play, Seitz writes, “while acting works to create a theatrical illusion, the roles we adopt in the course of everyday social interaction work to create a ‘reality’ that can and should be distinguished from the pretense of the stage” (183). According to the Summerfields, when people enact roles, they use their own words, not someone else’s (183).

The tutoring situation can be considered an “everyday social interaction” in which student and tutor play the roles, respectively, of writer and reader. The tutor/reader uses his or her own words to respond to the writer. When the tutor responds to survey or interview questions, he or she may be playing different types of roles. Note that in the first two examples outlined above, it’s not likely the faculty tutor or peer tutor would in reality be a member of this target audience of hotel managers or coaches. In the second two examples, the tutor may be an actual member of the target audience: a consumer of inexpensive technology products or a local resident. In these latter instances, it should be even easier for the tutor to play the role of audience member than it might be to play that role for an academic paper. The tutor’s experience as a member of the local community, for example, is a lived one, a role daily enacted in the real world. That same (peer) tutor, no matter how well able to imagine him or herself in the role of the professor reading a paper, is not an actual professor (yet). However, the words the tutor uses when responding within both situations are nevertheless real, are nevertheless his or her own.

The importance of the role of the reader has been the subject of some debate. In his 1975 article “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction,” Walter Ong writes, “the audience must correspondingly fictionalize itself. A reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life” (12). Here, Ong focuses on readers of fiction. But what of readers of such nonfiction materials as interview and survey questions? What of the tutor who encounters such texts in his or her role of tutor/reader? In this case, the role of the reader might, indeed, “[coincide] with his role in the rest of actual life.” She may be a consumer of inexpensive technology products. He may be a member of that local community. Ede and Lunsford, in “Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy,” respond to Ong: “to stress that the reader’s role ‘seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life’” constitutes “an oversimplification” that “overemphasizes the writer’s independence and power” (165). Ede and Lunsford offer a different approach to audience than the one taken by Ong and other scholars; they point to the importance of both reader and writer: “The most complete understanding of audience thus involves a synthesis of the perspectives we have termed audience addressed, with its focus on the reader, and audience invoked, with its focus on the writer” (167). Importantly, Ede and Lunsford also note a role for actual outside readers: “Writers who wish to be read must often adapt their discourse to meet the needs and expectations

“Focusing on audience offers tutors an effective starting point for helping writers with survey and interview questions.”

TAKE NOTE

EUROPEAN WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

May 6-9, 2012
American University in Bulgaria
Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria
“Creating Communities
of Collaboration: Writers,
Learners, Institutions”

Our 2012 conference aims to offer a space for working collaborations in the fields of writing center work and writing pedagogies. To enable vivid networking across borders, we invite presentations, workshops, and poster presentations, but will also offer open space sessions and ongoing group work throughout the conference. For a more complete CFP, contact Filitsa Mullen (fmullen@aubg.bg).

Send 250-300-word abstract for all formats to Filitsa Mullen by December 15, 2011. EWCA website: <www.writingcenters.eu>. We are looking forward to meeting you in Blagoevgrad, described by *The Rough Guide of Bulgaria* as “the coolest place in south-west Bulgaria.”

of an addressed audience. They may rely on past experience in addressing audiences to guide their writing, or they may engage a representative of that audience in the writing process” (166). One such audience representative can be the tutor.

The tutor as reader is always, to borrow Ede and Lunsford’s phrase, “a representative of that audience.” He or she is never the final—or the only—person the interview or survey questions will be presented to. Working with students on surveys clarifies the tutor’s role as one reader among many particularly well. After all, the student explicitly intends for many people to respond. In *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*, Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner discuss the relative benefits and drawbacks of generalist versus specialist tutoring. They quote Mykl Novak, a past tutor, who says, “The writer should see the writing center tutor as one reader of her text” (160). Our students know they are testing questions out on the tutor as one representative of this audience. When tutors belong to the demographic being targeted, say technology consumers or local residents, they play more of the role of specialist. Such tutors are part of the real-world group who would be reading the text and as such might be able to contribute more information than other tutors about how that group might respond. At other times, tutors do not belong to the demographic and will have to perform more imaginative role plays, picturing themselves as hotel managers or coaches.

To some, the tutor being a member of the group addressed may seem too convenient and unrealistic a situation, one that the average writer may not have access to in the course of composing. James Seitz, for example, emphasizes the importance of students learning to write for an “unknown” audience: “Rather than simply determining the dominant characteristics of their readers in advance, students need to examine self-consciously the process of constructing unknown readers even as they write, and to consider more carefully just whom they imagine these readers to be” (163). Seitz goes on to caution that “by sharply defining the intended audience, role-play assignments tend to evade one of the most difficult challenges a writer confronts—namely, how to address a diverse and unpredictable group of readers and to anticipate the conflicting forms of their response” (163). In the writing center, the tutor may serve as a temporarily “sharply defin[ed]” audience, but the student writer should come to understand that the tutor is just one audience member among many. Further, the tutor, while he or she as one individual cannot offer the benefits of a diverse group, can offer the benefit of being unpredictable in response to a writer. Through this unpredictability—asking questions and expressing genuine confusion in areas the writer did not anticipate—tutors can stretch writers’ imaginations. We might hope that with practice, writers will also become better at constructing and imagining wider audiences.

A “GOAL BEYOND THE PAGE”

Survey and interview questions also present an interesting audience situation because they fall somewhere between the “real-world” business writing that students do to obtain an internship or job and the writing students do for professors. Whom the writer targets largely determines the relative importance of process vs. product. In her article “Nobody’s Business?: Professional Writing and the Politics of Correctness,” Melissa Ianetta explains that the minimalist tutoring approach advocated by Jeff Brooks in his article “Minimalist Tutoring” assumes “that the writing seen in the writing center is not ‘real world’; indeed, it exists in contrast to professional writing” (11). Ianetta goes on to quote Brooks: “Most ‘real-world’ writing has a goal beyond the page; anything that can be done to that writing to make it more effective ought to be done. Student writing, on the other hand, has no real goal beyond getting it on the page” (qtd. in Ianetta 11). It has no “real” goal because the audience is the professor.

But just as does business writing, surveys and interviews constitute a type of “real-world” writing with a “goal beyond the page.” Readers will be interacting with the text in ways that will help determine the success or failure of research. As the experts cautioned, if a survey respondent, for example, doesn’t understand the question, misinterprets it, or is led to respond in a certain manner, that person may answer in a way that changes the results. A tutor can point out such situations not necessarily because of genre expertise, but because of an awareness of audience. This awareness comes both from being someone who consults with writers regularly and, more immediately, from playing the role of an actual outside audience member.

Despite their “goal beyond the page,” however, with regard to what determines their success, surveys and interviews often fall closer to academic papers than to business writing. Again, the reason is audience. For example, proofreading is less of an issue for surveys and interviews than it is for business writing. Clarity remains important—the wrong word could misdirect a respondent—but absolute correctness is not. Most people would not refuse to respond to a survey containing a few grammatical errors, especially if they knew the survey was part of an undergraduate’s project. Miscommunication may not elicit the type of responses hoped for, but it likely will not lead the student to fail the project. A resume or cover letter, in contrast, could be thrown out as the result of a proofreading error.

As in academic writing, students’ missteps in composing survey and interview questions often lead to productive learning. Many professors ask students for a limitations section as part of the thesis discussion or conclusion. This section addresses what could have been improved, including everything from a different sample population to the rewording of misleading questions. In this later stage of the assignment, our tutors often help students analyze and evaluate those limitations. Process becomes more important than product. But the audience remains key for writers and tutors to think about.

CONCLUSION

Writing conferences focusing on survey or interview questions offer writers and tutors alike a tangible demonstration of the real-world importance of audience. Tutors, as in all situations encountered in the writing center, must be able to play the role of reader/audience. As with all genres, having a basic understanding of expectations and conventions can certainly be helpful. But tutors need not be genre experts. Although tutors may at first be intimidated by surveys and interviews, it may be easier than with other types of writing for them to imagine themselves in the audience role. While they are more used to serving as the audience for an academic paper, in that context the role is frequently more artificial. In contrast, survey and interview situations may very well be real to the tutor’s life, such as with the tutor who frequently consumes inexpensive technology products, or who lives in a community where the town safety program has been implemented. Or, as with the hotel manager or coach, the survey/interview questions might offer the tutor a more concrete, though less familiar, role to step into than that of the grading professor. Focusing on audience offers tutors an effective starting point for helping writers with survey and interview questions. In turn, these genres have the potential to make the broader concept of audience that much more real and immediate, both to writers and to tutors. ♦

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TAKE NOTE

ROCKY MOUNTAIN PEER TUTORING CONFERENCE

March 30-31, 2012
Utah State University
Logan, Utah
Writing Center as Expert

Conference Chairs: Star Coulbrooke, Susan Andersen, Amber Bowden, and Julie Foust, in consultation with Christopher LeCluyse. Call for Proposals will appear on the conference website: <<http://writing.usu.edu>>, December 9, with a proposal deadline scheduled for Jan. 27. For further information, send an e-mail to star.coulbrooke@usu.edu.



DIALOGIC FOR “THEIR OWN ENDS”: INCREASING THE PEDAGOGICAL INDEPENDENCE OF PEER TUTORS IN THE WRITING CENTER AND THE FIRST-YEAR WRITING CLASSROOM

◆ Rita Malenczyk and Lauren Rosenberg
Eastern Connecticut State University
Willimantic, CT

If writing centers are going to finally be accepted, surely they must be accepted on their own terms, as places . . . offering a continuous dialectic that is, finally, its own end.
--Stephen North, “The Idea of a Writing Center”

Despite years of effort by our Rhetoric and Composition faculty to develop a writing center on our campus, Eastern Connecticut State University, it took grant funding and administrative worries about student retention to get such a center established. Our center opened in 2008 with startup funding from Project Compass, a Nellie Mae Foundation program administered by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE). The four-year Project Compass grants—which have been awarded to four colleges in the region, including ours—are designed to assist specifically with retention of first-generation and low-income students as well as students of color. Since these students comprise more than half the population of our university, the administration used this fact to justify why grant funding could be channeled toward establishing a writing center as part of a larger Academic Services Center (ASC). Though we already had a peer tutor program established—tutors had, for some years, been trained to provide one-to-one tutoring in our developmental writing class, ENG 100P—a writing center would extend tutoring services to a greater percentage of our student population.

While this extension of tutoring services was certainly welcome, it did nevertheless raise the specter of data collection and accountability in ways that, while pressing for all writing centers, created a particular kind of urgency for us. Our dean, who is the principal investigator on the grant, continues to require data from us showing that students are actually using the services the grant is funding. So, despite the commonly held notion among writing center directors that students should be encouraged rather than required to attend writing centers, our administration maintains that the Project Compass cohort should be required to attend—or, at least, as required as they can be, given (1) that our union contract prohibits us from explicitly making first-year composition teachers send their students to the center and (2) our own reservations about doing such a thing.¹

Our task, then, as Writing Center Director (Rita) and Coordinator of First-Year Composition (Lauren), has been to establish a center that, while responding to administrative concerns, still remains grounded in good practice and maintains tutor and director autonomy. We would like here to discuss a model Lauren has developed on our campus that potentially imbues peer tutors with considerable agency to bring to their work with student-clients, whether or not those students are required to attend the writing center. We argue that through a type of faculty development that encourages peer tutors to participate in pedagogical conversations along with first-year instructors, we offer the tutors an opportunity to foster agency as knowledgeable writing specialists—agency that will, we hope, ultimately benefit our student clients as well as the faculty who teach writing on our campus.

FACULTY AND TUTORS WORKING TOGETHER

Ongoing faculty development, especially for adjunct instructors in our first-year writing program, has always been within the purview of our first-year writing course. However, the Project Compass initiative

has provided additional incentive to offer workshops that connect the goals of the writing center with the practice of individual classroom teachers. Four times a year, Lauren conducts workshops on pertinent pedagogical issues in first-year writing. Topics have included the following: the writing center and how it functions; the CCCC statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language; and peer response in writing classes. Currently, one of the features of the workshops is that peer tutors are invited to attend as part of their ongoing tutor training. Lauren began inviting tutors to the workshops because she wanted instructors to hear from people on the ground who shared the daily needs of students. As mentors and guides to their peers, tutors are able to assist students in negotiating academic discourse while also retaining a sense of their own integrity and purpose as people with different motivations and experiences from those promoted by the institution. As it turns out, their participation in the workshops has been extremely valuable because the tutors are willing to discuss sensitive issues in composition from their unique perspective as students and writing center practitioners.

For example, at a workshop on Students' Right to Their Own Language, tutors intervened in a heated discussion of how the CCCC statement impacts the way instructors respond to student writing. One tutor gave the example of a student he had worked with who wrote in an explicitly "street" dialect. While the student's writing wasn't grammatically incorrect, it certainly did not have the tone of academic discourse. So, the tutor posed a question to the attending faculty: "how should I have helped the student with this paper?" As the tutor explained it, the writer was trying to make the argument that he didn't fit into the community of students at that university because he had a different cultural and linguistic perspective from most of his peers. The language of his paper underscored the inequity he was experiencing and pointed to the limitations of many of his classmates' views. The tutor's description of the conflict he faced as he wrestled with how to advise the writer was so well articulated that it influenced the course of the faculty workshop discussion. The lens turned to focus on that student whose experience had been invalidated by his classmates just as his language had been previously invalidated by high school teachers and now by his professors. It wasn't an easy conversation, yet the tutors were able to hold their own and leave the meeting feeling confident that they represented the best needs of their students.

On another occasion, Lauren led a workshop on peer response. At each of the two sessions, more than a third of the attendees were classroom and writing center tutors, who mixed with instructors in a discussion of how peer response can enhance learning in first-year writing classes and how it should be implemented. While there was general agreement that peer response is valuable, questions about the actual atmosphere in classrooms where students can be resistant or nervous and teachers might be tense about their own methods, positioned tutors in counterpoint with some faculty participants. Tutors—most of whom had been students in our first-year writing courses—were able to advise faculty about how thorough an explanation was needed in their assignment sheets to maintain consistent peer response groups or to make different combinations of students, and what tutors' own roles should be in the classroom and when reviewing drafts at the writing center. One tutor asserted that he wants to be in a position where he can facilitate conversation with and among students in their classroom without being in a policing role for the teacher. Another reminded participants of the level of comfort that a tutor can create simply because the peer tutor is not an evaluator and how that relationship can lead to better student writing. One tutor explained that when he listens to students read their papers aloud and when he talks with them about their writing objectives, he offers them a different audience from the one(s) they have written to. He explained that his feedback often helps student writers examine their own perspectives.

While our tutors, then, certainly serve the needs of faculty and support the courses we teach, they are also—and perhaps more importantly—autonomous agents who are thinking about learning in

ANNOUNCEMENTS

WLN Development Editor Call

The *Writing Lab Newsletter* is seeking applications from our readership for a new position, titled *Writing Lab Newsletter* Development Editor. The Development Editor will help broaden *WLN's* reader base and also strengthen *WLN's* online presence, including orchestrating new interactive features, facilitating community spaces, and engaging in outreach to *WLN* readers and writing center practitioners. This new editorial position will give the successful candidate a chance to be part of an established publication in our field while helping to shape the future of *WLN* and writing center scholarship.

Applicants should have knowledge of social media, Web 2.0 applications, usability and accessibility, technology and writing, and be knowledgeable about writing center work. Please note that all positions on *WLN* are on a voluntary basis; such work is voluntary service to the profession.

Applicants should submit a CV and 2-page statement describing their vision for encouraging wider readership and enlarging the web presence of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Deadline for applications: Dec. 1, 2011. Send materials (and questions) by e-mail (subject heading: Development Ed. Application) to Muriel Harris: harrism@purdue.edu.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Center For Writing Excellence,
Director
University of Wisconsin—Eau
Claire

The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire seeks to hire a probationary, tenure-track position at the rank of Assistant Professor, beginning August 20, 2012.

Required Qualifications: Earned doctorate in Rhetoric and Composition or related field. ABD candidates must complete all requirements for doctoral degree by August 20, 2012. Evidence of excellence in teaching writing at the college level, in addition to strong scholarship or scholarly potential. Experience in writing center administration.

Please see <<http://www.uwec.edu/acadaff/jobs/faculty/index.htm>> for complete position description and application procedures.

For priority consideration, applications are asked to be received via e-mail by 12:00 midnight on November 1, 2011. But screening will continue until position is filled, and applications received after Nov. 1 will be considered. A criminal background check will be required prior to employment. UW-Eau Claire is an AA/EEO employer dedicated to enhancing diversity.

different ways from us. Because of their hybrid role as mentors and students, tutors are able to make connections with students from both of those identities. Part of the tutors' agency is in their hybrid position. They are trained to bridge student and faculty needs and expectations, yet their bridging role is more complex than simply brokering assignments. As tutor-students, they act as negotiators between students and student concerns, between student-faculty concerns, and their own individual concerns. Because they stand, to paraphrase Muriel Harris, in a middle place, they are particularly aware of the complexities and implications of the discourse negotiations they arrange.

We noticed, too, that the faculty members who attended Lauren's workshop on peer response were taking notes furiously and speaking back to comments made by the tutors. The tutors were enhancing faculty development, not only at that workshop but at a subsequent meeting during which participants were challenged to examine the way they teach grammar. Through a series of games and exercises designed to disrupt people's notions of grammatical correctness and error, participating faculty considered the judgment calls they make when they comment on students' sentences and how those comments often ignore or close off possibilities of meaning. Granted, some tutors revealed themselves to be as sold as some instructors on the teaching of grammar rules, but many found this discussion about the choices student writers make quite accessible. It may, in fact, have been a relief to some tutors to hear grammar discussed as choices about making meaning rather than as locating and fixing mistakes, especially since our writing center tutors are often in the awkward position of having to explain to faculty across disciplines why correcting students' grammar is not their primary objective in tutoring sessions. At this workshop, mixed groups of faculty and tutors worked together to analyze student-authored sentences from a few different grammatical perspectives. In some groups the tutors were actually able to lead their faculty partners in understanding why a more rhetorical or critical strategy towards responding to a student's grammar choices might ultimately become a better teaching moment than focusing on error.

Having seen the interactions between tutors and faculty in faculty development workshops, it is our belief that inviting tutors to take part in such workshops is a way to probe traditional faculty perspectives and to represent students' voices. It is also a means to acknowledge tutors as seasoned experts who can offer insights into their peers' motivations and writing blocks that sometimes exceed faculty knowledge. Tutors express an alternative model of learning. They speak of a collaborative relationship among peers rather than the hierarchical relationship we faculty tend to describe when we talk about student concerns.

Furthermore, when tutors leave these workshops and other tutor training sessions, they bring their knowledge back to the collaborative tutor-tutee situation. One tutor who had worked in both ENG 100P and the Writing Center for several years and had attended a number of Lauren's faculty development workshops, noted in some written comments following a workshop:

I have had unexpected success stories over the course of the last semester and a half working in the Writing Center. There are students who appreciate working with me and the other tutors to the point where they specifically seek me out (and the other tutors they enjoy working with). There is a level of satisfaction that comes from this. We see the progress that takes place over the course of the semester and how certain students develop into confident writers. There is also a level of continuity and trust between the tutors and students which, quite frankly, the professors may have difficulty establishing in the classroom environment. These are all important aspects of the Writing Center and our methodology.

Perhaps most importantly, the tutor went on to note that his own perspectives and knowledge had also been validated by the workshops:

I plan on pursuing a career in education, and it is workshops like the one on Tuesday which reinforce my belief that I have something to contribute to academics, and perhaps my theories on education are not all that far off.

CONCLUSION: TUTORS AS REPRESENTATIVES OF COLLABORATIVE KNOWLEDGE

In “The Politics of Peer Tutoring,” Harvey Kail and John Trimbur focus on the empowering shift that can take place for tutors and their student clients when they collaborate on knowledge making. Together, tutors and tutees can set up a situation where both student groups gain more autonomy as makers of knowledge outside the authority of the traditional academic space and can thus claim greater agency. Similarly, by participating in faculty development workshops, peer tutors gain agency as the representatives of that collaborative knowledge. The tutors’ perspective enriches and extends conversations about how to reconcile institutional demands and good writing center practice. By listening to our peer tutors, writing program/center administrators can learn more about the needs, desires, criticisms, and anxieties of our students; and faculty who teach in our program and send students to our center may best learn by inviting tutors to participate in their ongoing conversations. ♦

Notes

¹These reservations stem, perhaps unsurprisingly, from North and the influence “The Idea of a Writing Center” still has over much writing center scholarship and administration. However, subsequent work has problematized the notion that required writing center visits are bad for students: see, for example, Bourelle, Clark, Gordon. ♦

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TAKE NOTE

IWCA GATHERING @ NCTE

November 17, 2011
Catalyst Ranch, Chicago
“Revising the Present”

The Gathering is being hosted by The Chicagoland Organization of Writing, Literacy, and Learning Centers (COWLLC).

This day-long meeting (before the annual NCTE meeting) will include conversations, workshops, presentations, and panel discussions for directors and tutors. The meeting will be held in a unique venue, The Catalyst Ranch (<www.catalystranch.com>), a renovated meatpacking plant described as “a dynamic and funky space where modern meeting necessities meet your mom’s glorious ‘70’s kitchen.”

To view the program for the day (also posted on the COWLLC Facebook page) and to register, please visit the COWLLC website (<<http://sites.google.com/site/chicagoowllc/iwca-gathering-ncte>>). For further information, contact the chair, Andrew Jeter (andjet@d219.org).

TAKE NOTE

SYMPOSIUM ON WRITING CENTERS IN ASIA

February 4, 2012
National Graduate Institute for
Policy Studies
Tokyo, Japan

The National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) will hold the Fourth Symposium on Writing Centers in Asia. This symposium will provide an opportunity for a community of scholars, teachers, university administrators, students, and other professionals to exchange ideas about the role of writing centers in nurturing and advancing the culture of academic writing in Asia as well as the use of writing to improve teaching and learning. More information is available on the following website: <<http://swca.ixspeed.com/>>.

Proposals for presentations are welcome. The submission deadline is December 10, 2011. For further information, please contact the Organizing Committee, Writing Centers Association of Japan: Katerina Petchko, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies; Tom Gally, The University of Tokyo; George Hays, Tokyo International University. Website: <<https://sites.google.com/site/wcajapan/>>. E-mail: wcajapan@gmail.com.

CAUGHT BETWEEN A TEACHER AND A TUTOR

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Northern Virginia Community College
Annandale, VA

Nearly thirty years ago, Nancy Sommers revealed that student writers view revision as a rewording activity undertaken to satisfy a “teacher-reader who expects compliance with rules . . . and will cite any violation” (46-8). She urged instructors to help students see revision as discovery instead (53). Ideally, instructors can do just that. However, such is not always the case; sometimes, tutors face the dilemma of having to enable student “success” by helping students meet their instructors’ flawed and/or authoritarian expectations for revision. An instructor might misunderstand a student’s writing, but it is still (somehow) the student’s fault for not communicating clearly. Moreover, an instructor can penalize even the best rhetorical choices if they do not result in the kind of writing expected or valued by the instructor. Tutors usually help students in such situations adapt their writing to meet the instructor’s expectations. However, this process of assimilation can destroy a student’s authority and place the writing center in a subordinate role (Grimm 2). The dangers of assimilation were brought home to me by my experience with a student named Lee, a sophomore who was working on a narrative essay for his non-credit basic writing course. By helping Lee change his writing to align with the instructor’s erroneous reading and domineering attitude, I frustrated, discouraged, and marginalized him. And for what? In every conflict between his writing and the instructor’s feedback, Lee did not substantially revise or rethink his writing; he simply changed words. The instructor’s response and my tutorial assimilated Lee and his writing but did not help him understand revision, let alone grow as a writer, student, or intellectual.

At our first meeting, Lee wanted to know what I liked and what I “hated” about his narrative essay. Upon reading the paper, I immediately detected a punctuation error pattern. For example, Lee began his essay, “The thing I am going to tell you about is something that is a very easy habit to get into but it is a horribly bad thing, that is procrastination.” This sentence exemplifies the less formal, conversational writing style he had intentionally attempted. Throughout the essay, his writing often lacked commas or had commas when other punctuation would have been more appropriate. I refrained from marking the errors and continued reading. When I finished, I was impressed with both Lee’s writing ability and my reading skills. I congratulated myself for detecting a dominant error pattern so quickly and easily. I discussed the essay’s many strengths at length, making a conscious effort to boost his confidence. Then I read Lee’s first paragraph aloud, and he immediately said it sounded fine. I agreed and pointed out that readers see rather than hear language’s flow; therefore, in writing, one has to represent the pauses of speech with appropriate punctuation. Then I presented a punctuation lesson and asked Lee to correct his errors with me acting as a guide. With his broad concerns (he asked what I liked and “hated” about his paper), Lee essentially relinquished his role in negotiating our session’s agenda. Nonetheless, I believed that because our conference had “a mutually agreeable and mutually understood direction” (Newkirk 313), I felt comfortable with it based on my perceptions of “the dynamic among student, tutor, text, and assignment” (Pemberton 13).

I could have addressed other issues besides punctuation, notably Lee’s wordiness. Instead, I focused on boosting his confidence with expansive praise and selective criticism rather than correcting every error. I hoped to contribute to Lee’s growth as a student and did not realize I was possibly contravening the values of academic culture. In *Good Intentions*, Nancy Grimm argues that most educators want all students, regardless of “class, country, or culture,” “to write, think, cite, and talk in clear, coherent, rational English” (2). Since educators also value “individual autonomy and responsibility,” if a student struggles with writing, “the problem . . . is presumed to lie with the student” rather than the educators’ assumption that expectations for academic writing are natural and clear to everyone (2). In this view, writing centers exist to help “problem” students improve “the clarity, order, and correctness” of their writing (2). In effect, tutors support the teacher’s position while showing students “the kind of writing valued in the academy” (8). In the process, they can easily disregard the students’ intentions for their writing. For instance, teaching standard punctuation assimilated Lee’s intended conversational style of writing into “clear, coherent, rational English.”

However, I did not assimilate his writing nearly enough to satisfy his instructor. At our second meeting, Lee and I worked on revising his failing essay. Her comments briefly identified a few strengths before criticizing his point-of-view shifts, tense shifts, and apparent ambiguity. His body language and tone of voice revealed his frustration with his instructor's comments and his failing grade. No other errors were mentioned, and the instructor's marginalia either highlighted examples of shifts or asked for clarifications. The instructor clearly looked for error patterns and offered limited feedback to them, just as I did.

As I reviewed the circled words and corresponding marginalia, I realized that I had read over Lee's tense shifts in my eagerness to find an error pattern. For example, I was so focused on the punctuation errors in his sentence, "I had five weeks to complete my paper but who cares, I only needed twelve hours," that I did not even notice its verb tense shifts. Lee accepted the criticism of the tense and point-of-view shifts, as well as my advice for correcting them. Though we wrangled over several errors and comments, the instructor's most controversial comments occurred in the margins next to the essay's second paragraph:

One day in my English III class we were assigned a research paper. It was a humongous research paper that was worth a quarter of your final grade. In the past procrastination has led me to good grades and stuff, so as usual I procrastinate on one of the biggest papers in high school. If my memory serves me correctly my research paper was on any topic I chose. I decided to go with Alternative Sources of Energy. It had to be five pages long, have three different sources and two of the sources not from the Internet. I had five weeks to complete the paper. Deep down inside I knew I only needed twelve hours.

His instructor asked in the margin, "Why did you think it was so humongous?" Evidently, the instructor felt that Lee could not have simultaneously believed the paper was humongous but would require only twelve hours to write. I repeated the instructor's question, expecting to jot down his response. Lee took the paper from my hand and underlined "one of the biggest papers in high school." He returned the paper with a defiant glare.

I wanted to agree that his instructor should have connected the ideas in his writing, but instead, I discussed how modifying and supporting the sentence, "I knew I only needed twelve hours," could address his teacher's concern. I suggested changing "knew" to "thought" to emphasize the fact that he was ultimately wrong about how much time he needed to spend on the paper. I also suggested adding an explanatory sentence, such as "I thought wrong." Ultimately, Lee changed "knew" to "thought" but did not add supporting detail. If not for his instructor's comment, I never would have questioned my perception that Lee's "knew" was as subjective as "thought." "Knew" seemed intentionally ironic to me, evidenced by his previous characterization of procrastination as "horrible." In contrast, the instructor failed to see the semantic relationships among "the biggest paper in high school," "I knew I only needed twelve hours," and "horrible" procrastination. The supposed semantic error was really a failure in the instructor's reading, presumably caused by excessively focusing on error patterns. In the hunt for vagueness, the instructor seemed to have lost her interpretative skills. Then she found the vagueness for which she was searching. (Or maybe she understood but took issue with his word choices—more on this later.)

Clearly, searching for error patterns can lead to "tunnel vision" reading and thus significant reading errors. I saw a pattern immediately and focused on it to the exclusion of other patterns that emerged later in the essay. The instructor identified all the error patterns but missed the implicit coherence of Lee's writing. As human beings, we have the tendency to find what we look for, and research indicates that we also have difficulty seeing beyond what we seek. In the study "Gorillas in our Midst: Sustained Inattention Blindness for Dynamic Events," Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris asked subjects to watch a video of a basketball team and count their passes. Less than half of the subjects (44%) noticed when a woman in a gorilla suit walked past the players (1069). If teachers and tutors focus on error patterns, how many "gorillas" might they miss? How many errors? How much coherence? Looking for certain error patterns may cause deficient reading of and response to student writing when seeking those patterns ceases to be a reading strategy and instead becomes a reading purpose, a conscious or unconscious "tunnel vision."

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Writing Center Director University of Nebraska at Omaha

The Dept. of English at the U. of Nebraska at Omaha invites applications for a tenure-track Asst. Professor position with the additional title and duties of Writing Center Director, beginning 2012. Candidates must have a Ph.D. in English or a closely related field, specializing in Composition, Rhetoric, Writing Center Administration, or WAC.

The Writing Center director's responsibilities include oversight of the Writing Center's staff, promotion and outreach, assessment, reporting, and coordination of an active WAC initiative. Ancillary specialization in TESOL is desirable. The administrative assignment is 9 credit hours per year; in addition, the faculty member will have a 9-credit teaching assignment (three courses per year) and a 6-credit research assignment.

Applications should include a cover letter describing writing center experience and research and teaching interests, a curriculum vitae, three letters of reference, any available evidence of teaching effectiveness, and a writing sample of no more than 20 pages. The cover letter and CV must be submitted online: go to <www.unomaha.edu> click on Employment and then Current Job Openings Apply (in red). Letters of reference, teaching materials, and the writing sample should be sent to Dr. Nora Bacon, Search Committee Chair, Department of English, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 6001 Dodge Street, Omaha, NE 68182-0175.

Review of materials will begin on Nov. 15, 2011.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Writing Center Director
Whitworth University

Ph. D. in English, concentration in Composition and Rhetoric. Desire 1-year experience in writing center administration beginning fall 2012. 7-course load (including course release), first-year writing, and upper- and lower-level writing/rhetoric courses. Desired subspecialties: New Media, Gender Studies, or American Ethnic Studies. Load includes departmental duties, advising, faculty governance, and WAC. Salary competitive.

Send cover letter, vita (including 3 references), undergraduate/graduate transcripts (unofficial allowed), 2 recent sets of course evaluations, 2 recent syllabi, 3 recommendation letters, and a personal essay relating your Christian faith and teaching (see www.whitworth.edu/faculty-faithessay) to: Human Resource Services, Chair, English Department Search, Whitworth University, 300 W. Hawthorne Rd., Spokane, WA 99251 or jobs@whitworth.edu.

Job description is available at <http://www.whitworth.edu/Administration/HumanResources/Pdf/EnglishWCDirectorPA2011-0927.pdf>.

Whitworth University does not discriminate in its educational programs on the basis of race, color, age, religion, sex, national origin or physical disability.

Besides “tunnel vision,” the instructor’s hyper-focus on errors may have stemmed from deeper assumptions about students’ authority within the academy. As a basic writer, Lee was a cultural or intellectual “outsider” with no authority (Grimm 12). It is possible that his instructor failed to see the connections among his ideas because of her apparent assumption that Lee could not create subtle semantic links across various sections of writing. As soon as she saw a hint of vague, unclear, or inconsistent writing, the instructor seemed to assume that the student had a problem and then could not help but see more evidence of it (Grimm 2).

Or perhaps the instructor understood the connections among Lee’s ideas but desired more precise word choices than “humongous” or “biggest paper in high school.” Did “biggest” mean “longest,” “most complex,” or “most important” to his grade? I would argue that it could mean all of these things, and thus the word’s supposed “vagueness” actually makes it a precise (although not poetic) word choice. Perhaps if Lee were a professional writer, his readers would devote more effort to interpreting his words and less to critiquing them, especially since criticizing word choice leads students to view revision as rewording (Sommers 46-8). To be fair, the instructor’s feedback could be justified on the grounds that she was teaching the difference between “Writer-Based” and “Reader-Based” prose, as her comments require Lee to rely on explicit connections instead of reader inferences. Of course, writer-based prose should be converted into reader-based prose or else writing’s purpose (communication) is impossible. Yet I would not call Lee’s prose “writer-based.” It was not “an unfocused and apparently pointless discussion” that forced the reader to discern “ideas out of details” (Flower 126, 133). Rather, the instructor became hyper-focused on specificity and “blind” to subtle semantic connections and valid rhetorical choices.

Later in the essay, for example, Lee described wasting time driving to and from a distant library since his local library lacked sources on his topic; he named the location of the distant library but not his local one. The instructor wrote in the margin, “Where were you at?” Since the passage’s topic was wasting time the night before the paper’s due date, why did the specific locations matter? The answer is not the instructor’s error-focused reading or “inattentional blindness” but rather that Lee lacked authority as a writer. If he failed to specify some information, it was certainly not because he made a rhetorical choice to emphasize more important information; it was because he had problems with specificity. When I suggested adding the location, Lee expressed great frustration with having to waste his and the reader’s time with non-essential information. Moreover, the instructor’s question reinforced the “revision as rewording” mentality (Sommers 46-8). Though I shared Lee’s frustration, I justified the instructor’s comments on the grounds that she was teaching the importance of specificity so that readers could easily understand his thoughts. Lee replied, “Yeah, but doesn’t the reader have some responsibility for understanding what you write?” If Lee had authority, then the reader might have some responsibility for comprehending his writing. But because he is a student, his instructor does not grant him the authority to rely on reader interpretation. Gail Stygall argues in “Resisting Privilege” that instructor feedback is greatly influenced by the distinction between published authors and students, “apprentice writers who do ‘pseudo-writing’” (188). Lee’s situation perfectly illustrates this influence. The instructor’s attitude toward student authority, coupled with an emphasis on error patterns, produced a very myopic response to Lee’s writing.

Lee’s case is hardly unique. Again, Grimm argues that the academy wants students “to write, think, cite, and talk in clear, coherent, rational English” (2). Therefore, the effective instructor improves “the clarity, order, and correctness of student writing.” The “ideal” writing center in this scenario assists the academy by “unequivocally support[ing] the teacher’s position while showing students the kind of writing valued in the academy” (8). The process of assimilation—and silencing—can occur throughout the student’s

writing experience. Obviously, encouraging resistance to assimilation is not viable; students will not succeed with a complete disregard for an instructor's comments, and pretending otherwise will certainly disserve the student. If students fail as a result of writing consultations, the writing center will inevitably fail, too. No writing center wants students and instructors to say that it does not help. Yet, emphasizing errors and error patterns risks problematic reading mistakes, reinforcing the "revision as rewording" mentality, and countering the best practices of writing center work.

Alternatively, the tutor could emphasize relationship and focus on a student's personal growth rather than errors, correctness, and even higher-order concerns. Changing the tutorial's focus from product to person eliminates "defensive concerns about . . . adequately enacting the teacher's desires" (Grimm 19). This happened in my first session with Lee, when I granted him authority and stroked his confidence. However, Lee's final product suffered from my emphasis on relationship; as Lisa Delpit reminds us in "The Silenced Dialogue": "students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it" (573). In the conflict of instructor, tutor, and student authority, the instructor always holds the upper hand through grading, and emphasizing relationship instead of the instructor's trump card can damage the very thing that the tutor seeks to foster. How much did I harm my relationship with Lee—how much did I damage his confidence and growth—by setting him up to fail with glowing praise and scant attention to his writing's weaknesses, followed with a desperate attempt to assimilate his writing? Perhaps the best option is to break out of limiting dichotomies: assimilation vs. resistance, instructor authority vs. student authority, product vs. person, etc. Negotiating the conflict of instructor and student authority could involve compromise, negotiation, subversion, or some combination thereof. The tutor could refocus the session on the rhetorical situation, including how the assignment constructs the student, how the student's purpose can connect with the teacher-grader's expectations, and how the student might "negotiate with those expectations . . . beyond mere acceptance or rejection" (Grimm 24, 50). When instructor feedback (mis)directs students' attention to rewording, tutors can help the student dramatically revise and thus transcend that feedback.

For example, Lee's instructor did not recognize the incongruence of narrative essays and academic writing. To an extent, the narrative assignment set Lee up to make punctuation errors by allowing him freedom, but not authority, to affect a conversational style. Lee and I could have discussed ways to negotiate this complex rhetorical situation. We could have discovered ways to establish his authority through adhering to convention and then cleverly breaking it, thus both compromising with and challenging the instructor's attitude. When reviewing the marginalia, we might have determined how to subvert the instructor's expectation for mind-numbing specificity, perhaps through extensive revision as discovery. Our sessions could have gone much further than correct or incorrect, acceptance or rejection, assimilation or resistance.

Whatever approach one takes, it must be balanced with critical self-reflection and careful consideration of the student's best interests. Though seeking error patterns can lead to effective, efficient instruction, both teachers and tutors must remember that they may misunderstand student writing when they look for error patterns. When providing feedback, teachers and tutors have to evaluate their pedagogy if it results in rewording rather than revision. They must balance concern for the person with concern for the person's graded product. Most importantly, if they believe they have marginalized and silenced students through assimilation, they are obligated to question their methods, their motivations, and the limits of their dichotomies. ♦

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TUTOR'S COLUMN

MUSIC AND WORDS: HOW BAND CAMP TAUGHT ME TO BE A BETTER WRITING TUTOR

◆ *Joshua Thompson*
Virginia Polytechnic Institute
Blacksburg, VA

Working in a writing center can be intimidating, especially for an undergraduate tutor during his or her first sessions. Many tutors question their abilities, and these are justified worries. Most undergraduate tutors have never taught writing and feel that this lack of teaching experience will hinder them. I was the same way until I realized that I had been a teacher before—at band camp. And, surprisingly, the practice field and the writing center are more similar than one might think. Of all my band camp experiences, the one that sticks out in my mind involves a particular saxophone player, Emily, who helped me draw the connections between band camp and the writing center. Emily was a ninth-grader and what we in the marching band world call a “rookie”: she had never marched before, let alone march and play simultaneously! The band director I was working with brought Emily to my attention. For a rookie, she was a good marcher. However, making the smallest mistake frustrated her, and she would nearly give up.

I worked one-to-one with her, reviewing the basics because that was where she was having problems. During the first few minutes, she marched well. But then she got off step and was completely thrown off. She apologized for her mistakes and for not being a good marcher. I reassured her that she was, in fact, a good marcher considering she had never done this before. And to further encourage her, I reminded her that everyone has to start out learning the basics and that everyone makes mistakes on occasion. Being told this, Emily was determined to do her best to master the march. We worked together every day of the five-day band camp session. Emily had difficulty grasping the concept of the glide step, which is a particular way of moving smoothly that makes playing while marching much easier. If executed correctly, one should appear to glide across the ground. To help Emily, I used a “breaking down” method. She was too concerned with each mistake, so I explained to her what a glide step is and broke down the proper execution into individual movements. This approach definitely helped her, and we both noticed significant improvement. No longer was she letting a mistake upset her; she just focused on not doing it again. During the final performance, Emily was right in step with everyone else. Afterward, she ran up to me to thank me for working with her. She said that she didn’t think anyone expected her to be a good marcher. My help meant a great deal.

My work with Emily was very similar to many of my writing center sessions, especially those with freshmen. Like band rookies, freshmen are new to their environment—they are not sure what to expect from the university and oftentimes think the university expects too much from them. During several of my sessions with freshmen, the client thought his or her ideas wouldn’t make for a paper worthy of the professor’s expectations. But when I said, “I bet it is. Let’s hear it,” the client opened up and suddenly had a more positive outlook on the paper.

In “Self-Efficacy Beliefs and the Writing Performance of Entering High School Students,” Frank Pajares and Margaret J. Johnson point out that “[s]tudents who lack confidence in skills they possess...will more quickly give up in the face of difficulty” (172). I saw this with both Emily and the freshmen clients: because they thought others expected too much of them, when they faced difficulty, they lost confidence and started giving up. This frustration and lack of confidence in the face of difficulty presents another commonality between band camp and the writing center: the instructor’s and tutor’s crucial roles in addressing the situation.

Rookies will understandably be the weakest marchers, and band camp is always stressful for them. They want to do well, but being surrounded by veteran members who have been marching for years makes them feel intimidated and frustrated when they make a mistake. When a person is surrounded by success, even the smallest failure feels like a defeat. Marching band members can become so frustrated with learning the basics that they close up and give up on marching band entirely. However, as a band camp instructor, it is my job to help students see that they are capable of being good marchers; once they work through the difficulties, being off step and basic marching mistakes are a thing of the past.

When frustration crops up in the writing center, the best thing to remember is to point out the big picture to students. Get them to view the situation objectively; this often involves addressing global concerns, such as structure, organization, and development, rather than local concerns, such as grammar. Students will most likely come into the writing center worried about local concerns; however, it's important for a writing center tutor to not let them become discouraged about a few minor errors and forget that they have the potential to improve in their writing. If students think less of themselves, they close up and may begin to become more uncomfortable and anxious about writing. As writing center tutors, we acknowledge students' weaknesses and help them overcome them and grow as writers by praising their strengths.

When we see this frustration and lack of confidence, it's our job as tutors and mentors to instill confidence where confidence isn't. Even though there is much more to teaching than praise, a little bit of encouragement is more important than one might think. Sometimes, encouraging words are all that is needed to put a marcher or a student back on the track to success. In addition, other aspects of band camp instruction can be applied to writing center theory and practice. When band directors are trying to get a point across about music, they often use rather corny metaphors; however, despite their silly nature, they work. For example, my band director likes to compare an accented yet spirited melody to an elephant doing ballet: it's heavy but light and quick. Students see the connection; they understand that although the music is heavily emphasized with the accents, it still needs to be quick and lively, like a large elephant dancing in a tutu.

The same can be done in the writing center. For example, when trying to explain the semicolon to a client, a writing center tutor could use a metaphor—or, in this case, a simile—to supplement the teaching. I have heard a tutor say that a semicolon is like the marriage between a period and a comma. With this comparison, the student might be able to better understand a semicolon's use. Like the comma, it joins; however, like the period, it separates complete sentences. The student then applies his or her knowledge of a marriage to understand that a semicolon connects two complete sentences in a way that combines the effects of a period and a comma.

I have also borrowed other approaches from band camp to use in the writing center. The “breaking down” method that I used with Emily works well when addressing article usage, especially with international students. As we know, unlike English, many languages do not use articles. Therefore, it's understandable for an international student to have problems using “the,” “a,” and “an.” When I am tutoring such a student, he or she is often too concerned with the usage error, becomes frustrated, and begins to give up. When this occurs, the student and I shift our concern away from the error and focus on the grammar rules. For example, depending upon the subject of the paper, I ask the student, “Are you talking about a specific book or any book?” I then explain that if he or she is referring to a particular object, then “the” should be used, and if he or she is not referring to a particular subject, then “a” or “an” should be used. Breaking down the article usage rules in this way seems to really help international students understand the idea. At times, a different approach is what is needed for a student to grasp a concept, whether it be crescendos and key signatures or grammatical marks and sentence structure.

While the tables of the writing center are very different from the football field, writing center theory and practice is strikingly similar to marching band instruction. Sometimes what is most needed is encouragement and positive reinforcement for a student to start to grow into his or her potential. While teaching is much more than reassuring words, praise is a critical component, especially in tutoring. ♦

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CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

February 16-18, 2012: Southeastern Writing Centers Association, in Richmond, KY

Contact: Russell Carpenter: russell.carpenter@eku.edu; Conference website: <<http://www.iwca-swca.org/Conferences.html>>.



March 30-31, 2012: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Shippensburg, PA

Contact: Karen Johnson: kgjohnson@ship.edu. Conference website: <<http://mawca2012.intuitwebsites.com/index.html>>.



April 13-15, 2012: Northeast Writing Centers Association, in New York, NY

Contact: Conference website: <www.northeastwca.org>.



May 6-9, 2012: European Writing Centers Association, in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria.

Contact: Filitsa Mullen: fmullen@aubg; Conference website: <www.writingcenters.eu>.



October 25-27, 2012: International Writing Centers Conference, in San Diego, CA

Contact: Conference website: <<http://www.socialwritingcenters.org/iwca2012/index.html>>.

