

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 39, Number 5-6

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing  
<[www.writinglabnewsletter.org](http://www.writinglabnewsletter.org)>

Jan./Feb. 2015

## – FROM THE EDITOR –

The first *WLN* issue of 2015 begins with two articles about programs that focus on meeting student needs and ends with a tutor's account of working with a student with special needs. Stephanie White and Elisabeth Miller introduce us to their program that assists seniors writing theses by setting up groups for them to meet, interact, and support each other. Then Heather Blain Vorhies explains the rationale and workings of the graduate-level writing center where she works. Finally, Amy Whitcomb writes this issue's Tutor's Column essay about her work with a student who is visually impaired.

Between these articles is a selection of reflections on Jeff Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring" article, with a variety of responses from tutors and directors in the U.S., Bangladesh, the U.K., and Algeria. The pieces in this issue represent an interesting cross-section of the responses we've received. We look forward to receiving more in the hope of including additional reflections in future issues of *WLN*—either on Brooks' article (including some we already have and hope to include in the next issue) or as responses to some of the reflections included in this issue. Please send all reflections on Brooks or to these reflections to the *WLN* website. And, included in this issue are Jeff Brooks' comments on his long-ago article. We welcome your suggestions for the next article to reflect on, and please e-mail those directly to me: <[harrism@purdue.edu](mailto:harrism@purdue.edu)>.

You'll also find some news of *WLN*'s new staff and projects on pages 4–5. I invite you to pull up a comfortable chair and enjoy some good reading.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

## INSIDE

### *Senior-Thesis Writing Groups: Putting Students in the Driver's Seat*

◆ Stephanie White and Elisabeth Miller ◆

Page 1

### *Building Professional Scholars: The Writing Center at the Graduate Level*

◆ Heather Blain Vorhies ◆

Page 6

### *Reflections on Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring"*

◆ Jeff Brooks ◆

Page 10

◆ Timothy Conklin ◆

◆ Owain Heyden ◆

◆ Dimitar Angelov ◆

Page 11

◆ Andrew Ribn ◆

◆ Emily Cousins ◆

◆ Steven Corbett ◆

Page 12

◆ Maria Soriano ◆

◆ Erica Corder ◆

◆ Djalal Tebib ◆

Page 13

### *Tutor's Column: "Blurring My Boundaries: Insights from Tutoring a Student with Visual Impairments"*

◆ Amy Whitcomb ◆

Page 14

### *Calendar for Writing Center Associations*

Page 16

## SENIOR-THESIS WRITING GROUPS: PUTTING STUDENTS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

◆ Stephanie White and Elisabeth Miller  
University of Wisconsin–Madison  
Madison, WI

On a Sunday morning in February, five students brave the winds howling off the lakes around Madison, Wisconsin, and straggle into the student union toward a table near the windows. They talk about their week and laugh about Facebook status updates before getting down to business. They've brought printed drafts or laptops, and they settle into what is now routine for them every week: a give-and-take conversation about the frustrations and triumphs of researching and writing undergraduate senior theses. This is no one-off study group cramming for an impending midterm; these students are committed undergraduate writers brought together by our Writing Center to encourage, support, and productively challenge each other's writing.

Peer writing and workshopping groups have a long history in composition studies as generative opportunities for collaboration (Bruffee; Elbow; Gere; Moss, Highberg and Nicolas). Such groups have been viewed as a means for developing students' autonomy and ownership over their writing; as Peter Elbow argues, "writing without teachers" can harness the energetic, supportive work of peers engaged in like-minded tasks. Likewise, Katrin Girgensohn draws the term "autonomous" from Anne Ruggles Gere to highlight the power of

*continued on page 2*

The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, published bi-monthly, from September to June, is a peer-reviewed publication of the International Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement. ISSN 1040-3779. All Rights and Title reserved unless permission is granted by the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Material can not be reproduced in any form without express written permission. However, up to 50 copies of an article may be reproduced under fair use policy for educational, non-commercial use in classes or course packets. Proper acknowledgement of title, author, and original publication date in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* should be included.

**Editor:**

Muriel Harris  
<harrism@purdue.edu>

**Associate Editors:**

Janet Auten  
<jauten@american.edu>

Kim Ballard  
<kim.ballard@wmich.edu>

Lee Ann Glowzinski  
<laglowzinski@gmail.com>

**Development Editor:**

Alan Benson  
<bensonat@uwec.edu>

**Blog Editor:**

Josh Ambrose  
(jambrose@mcdaniel.edu)

**Blog Associate Editor:**

Steffen Guenzel  
<Steffen.Guenzel@ucf.edu>

**Book Review Editor**

Sherry Wynn Perdue  
<wynn@oakland.edu>

**Managed and Produced by**

TWENTY SIX DESIGN LLC under agreement with  
WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER LLC  
52 Riley Road #380, Celebration, FL 34747  
(866) 556-1743  
<www.writinglabnewsletter.org>  
<support@writinglabnewsletter.org>

**Subscriptions:** The newsletter does not send bills but can issue invoices through the website. Yearly payments of \$25 (U.S. \$30 in Canada) by credit card are accepted through the website or sent by check, made payable to the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, to the address above. Prepayment is requested for all subscriptions. For international *WLN* subscriptions, contact <support@writinglabnewsletter.org>. For IWCA membership and *WCJ* and *WLN* subscriptions, see <writingcenters.org>.

**Manuscripts:** Before sending in submissions, please consult the guidelines and suggestions for prospective authors on the *WLN* website. Recommended length for articles is 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutors' Column essays, in MLA format (including Works Cited). Please send files through the *WLN* website.

students' ownership over their own writing in her pioneering "autonomous writing groups." Our writing center's senior-thesis writing groups are another example of this autonomy, as they are not part of a classroom or a credit-bearing context, nor are they run by a course instructor. Rather, these groups put students in the driver's seat as they learn to support and critique each other's writing without the presence of trained tutors or writing instructors. Writing groups are indeed a small but growing feature of writing center work. Rebecca Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney's 2011 survey of non-tutoring activities at roughly 150 writing centers found that 14 percent of writing centers surveyed coordinate writing groups, ten percent offer dissertation or thesis writing groups, and eight percent facilitate faculty writing groups (7). Yet, despite this trend, few scholarly articles examine writing group programs in writing centers specifically.

As the TA coordinators for our Writing Center's inaugural senior-thesis writing groups, we worked last year with sixteen smart, motivated students as they shaped and sustained their self-governed writing groups over two semesters. Each group of two to six students met weekly for one to two hours to share and discuss pre-writing, updates on progress, research questions, outlines, descriptions of their work, drafts of writing, and advisor feedback. Our experience showed us that these peer groups can provide powerful writing support in universities, and we want to highlight those successes here. But we also want to grapple with the challenges we encountered in order to interrogate the role that writing center coordinators can play in facilitating such groups. The role of TA coordinators is always in flux in our Writing Center—our positions shift to allow more graduate students to take on leadership positions. For that reason, our experience with senior-thesis groups was limited to two semesters, with our chance to make changes condensed into a short time. We therefore offer our recommendations based on the small changes we were able to make, as well as the big ideas we have for future similar groups. In particular, we examine the role writing center coordinators should have in shaping and facilitating peer writing groups, and we highlight the affordances and constraints of putting students in the driver's seat of their writing groups.

### HITTING THE ROAD

At the University of Wisconsin—Madison, a research institution with 30,000 undergraduates, a senior thesis is an optional, two-semester, six-credit research endeavour that culminates in an academic paper ranging from 25 to more than 60 pages. Students conduct rigorous primary and secondary research with careful data collection and incisive analysis. Many students also receive research funding for their theses. While our writing center has provided one-to-one help for senior-thesis writers, and a workshop on writing senior theses, our staff long ago identified a space for additional support for these undergraduate writers. Encouraged by our center's recent successes with writers' retreats and dissertation boot camps—which revealed that writers' groups are an apt response to our campus's writing needs—we set about establishing senior-thesis writing groups.

We spread the word through academic advisors, the honors program, student groups across campus, our website, and word of mouth. Once writers had registered on our website, we organized informational meetings to discuss logistics. We then pieced together the puzzle of group meeting schedules between students' classes, lab work, internships, jobs, and volunteer work. Our students' projects ranged from a study of modernity in sculpture, to an analysis of data from a sleep lab dealing with parasomnia, to an examination of queenship in Shakespeare's plays, to a study of rock formations in New Zealand, to a rhetorical examination of archived Asian-American campus publications, and many more. We worked to organize the writers roughly in humanities and life sciences groups so that they would have similar disciplinary bases to work from. Once the scheduling puzzle was complete, we each took on a coordinating role for two of four groups. We arranged the groups' first small-group meetings, assigning reading from Peter Elbow's *Writing with Power* and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*—both engaging pieces on giving and receiving feedback and participating in writing groups. During their first time meeting as a group, we led the students in a discussion of the readings, as well as in a group dynamics activity. Also drawing on the readings, we facilitated

a discussion to determine a structure for subsequent meetings. Seeking to preserve writers' autonomy, we did not dictate a particular format for each group. While we offered several options for ways to give and receive feedback, each group deliberated and then agreed on a structure for their groups on their own. As a result, each group's format looked slightly different: some chose to have monitors or leaders for each meeting, some established a weekly check-in, some initiated a Google Doc to record comments on each other's writing, some asked for written feedback, and some opted for verbal responses. After that first meeting, the writers continued to meet on their own. We asked them to keep us updated via a weekly e-mail or notes on a Google Doc, and we joined them for another meeting later in the semester, checking in to make sure that all was running smoothly and simply enjoying the company of these smart and motivated students.

### TRAVELING COMPANIONS: "AN AUDIENCE THAT UNDERSTANDS"

At the end of the first semester, we conducted surveys to find out what students found useful and what we could do to improve the groups. We were pleased to receive overwhelmingly positive survey responses. One of the most useful questions students answered was "What was most valuable to you about being in a senior-thesis writing group?" Interestingly, many responses were related to audience. As one student said, "Talking about my own thesis to an audience that understands the work and process behind it was valuable." Further responses revealed that such an understanding of audience was valuable for a number of reasons. One main takeaway about audience was the value of meeting regularly with people intimately familiar with the stress of thesis writing. As one student put it, the most valuable aspect was "personal interaction with people who are working on similar things and going through similar stress." This kind of audience—companions on the same bumpy road—gave students a place to talk honestly about their struggles and brainstorm potential solutions. As another student indicated, it was useful "just having a place where I knew that people understood the stress I was under. I appreciated hearing about their coping mechanisms." Additional students also valued this "motivation to keep going."

Beyond the coping mechanisms and empathy writers shared, interaction with the unique audience of their writing groups led to deep learning for students. One participant described the connection like this: "Sharing each other's experiences with organizing thesis writing processes helped me think about the thesis writing process more critically and creatively." Such critical and creative thinking, we argue, is linked to a committed audience. Specifically, the camaraderie that came from working in small groups on such a formidable task was constructive. As one student said, "I felt that all of my group members really cared about my research, which was reflected in the in-depth and supportive feedback they gave me every week." Another student expressed appreciation for the more formal aspect of audience provided by the group, noting how valuable it was to "explain my work to others and practice answering questions about my work," which provided "a better sense of clarity in my written and verbal work."

Finally, the groups acted as an inescapable audience for students, since they had committed to show up each week, ready to talk about their work. In their survey responses, students repeatedly cited accountability as essential. One writer explained that she appreciated "having a type of structure where I felt obligated to get work done every week before our meeting." Another student said, "I enjoyed having a weekly meeting to observe everyone's progress, including my own." It was encouraging to hear such responses, since accountability had been one of our top priorities for the groups. Overall, we were pleased with students' responses and how their self-designed and self-sustained groups met their needs and exceeded their expectations—an outcome that demonstrated first-hand the power of autonomy in writing groups.

### BACK-SEAT DRIVERS?

As expected with new programming, however, we encountered challenges and questions as these groups developed. Since our initial goal was to maintain the groups' autonomy while helping to mitigate any problems that arose, we wrestled with how involved we writing center instructors should be. Following Peter Elbow's and Kenneth Bruffee's models of peer-to-peer education that link deepened learning with minimal interven-

*“ [I]n writing-center sponsored peer writing groups, students belong in the driver's seat. ”*

# NEWS

## WLN News

### • WLN Staff

We are inordinately pleased to announce that Lee Ann Glowzenski has moved over from being our Associate Development Editor to the position of Associate Editor. She joins Kim Ballard in handling the very important work of overseeing the review process for new submissions: sending them on to reviewers and offering feedback to authors. Major thanks and large amounts of appreciation for Janet Auten's work as Associate Editor. To our regret, she is rotating off the staff in order to enjoy some much-needed rest from a very demanding position as Associate Editor.

In addition, our blog, "Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders," now has Josh Ambrose as our Blog Editor and Steffen Guenzel as Associate Blog Editor. They have already begun work on redesigning the blog, enlivening it with new contributions from blog readers, and developing interesting directions for the blog. See page 5 for their announcement of some of their projects.

### • WcORD: The WLN database of online resources

Lee Ann Glowzenski continues to head the development of the database, potentially to be named WcORD (Writing Center Online Resource Database), our online database of live links to resources useful for writing centers. At this point, as the database continues to grow rapidly, Lee Ann can use more volunteers to help collect and bookmark resources for the database. Volunteers should expect to spend one to two hours a week on the project. Please contact Lee Ann: <laglowzenski@gmail.com> for more information, and please do expect to live up to this commitment of time.

So far, we've come up a name for the database: WcORD or WCORD (Writing Center Online Resources Database). If you have better suggestions for a name or want to voice your opinion about WCORD or WcORD, let Lee Ann know.

*(continued on p. 5)*

tion from teachers, our *modus operandi* was to let groups sort out issues themselves, but we came to question whether this practice diminished the quality of the groups and excluded students. Challenges with group logistics and gaps in the peer support system were apparent in some students' survey responses. In response to the question, "Is there anything else that would have made your senior-thesis writing group more useful to you?" one student said, "One unfortunate thing that I have seen is that people have been sort of losing interest/getting too busy the further we go along." While we automatically wondered how we could have helped to assuage this problem, the student immediately went on to add "... there is little the Writing Center can do to change how hectic our lives are, so I do not have any recommendations." Students were quick to take on the burden of group management, rather than assigning responsibility to us as the Writing Center coordinators.

Other students also responded with ambivalence to our survey question about the Writing Center's role in the groups. One student observed, "I wish that everyone would have contributed more. I didn't appreciate when people didn't show up unannounced or just never 'got' to my writing piece." However, the participant ultimately concluded, "but that just comes with the personalities in the group, not necessarily the format." Students' group ownership seemed to permeate the surveys, showing up as a kind of responsibility for the management of all aspects of the group—and as a frequent assumption that we, as coordinators, could not have intervened more. To that end, another student speculated on meeting times, saying, "Maybe meeting every other week rather than every week [would have been better]." Yet he, too, immediately concluded, "However, this is more a logistical concern I feel my group members and I could work out."

We found survey responses like these compelling, since they suggested that problems in the groups weren't within the coordinators' jurisdiction; students didn't consider that we might have played a greater role in ensuring that the groups ran smoothly or in enriching the groups' learning and writing processes. Their responses made us wonder if they were simply being polite and trying not to burden us with their concerns. Or, we wondered, did students simply not know how we might have contributed to the groups—as arbitrators, motivators, or even simply as writing instructors? In other words, our resistance to being back-seat drivers may have limited the potential for collaboration. As one student put it in the survey, she was "not really sure what kind of role the Writing Center could play." However, we also see this group independence as success on our part in making the groups autonomous—in putting the agency for the groups' smooth operation in the hands of the students themselves.

## A ROAD MAP ALONG THE WAY

Ultimately, this tension between peer-group autonomy and Writing Center support allowed us to interrogate the range of role configurations that can be productive for students in peer writing groups. While remaining committed to students' ownership of their groups, we suggest that additional, specific support can also deepen student learning. Like Sohui Lee and Chris Golde in their discussion of dissertation bootcamps, we argue that writing-center sponsored writing groups should draw on coordinators' expertise to "act less as 'managers' [. . .] and more as educational leaders who advance knowledge in writing" (5). For our first semester, we took this "educational leadership" to mean offering readings on the value of giving and receiving feedback and engaging students in discussions of best practices at the beginning of the semester. But as we moved into the next semester, we responded to the survey feedback we received to expand our roles as leaders.

During our second semester, we identified new ways we could use our expertise in teaching and tutoring writing to support students more directly. Our main shift was going from attending two group meetings during the semester to attending four or five, staying for part or all of the sessions and joining in the discussions. For example, we participated in the "check-in" portion of meetings by sharing what writing we were currently working on and what struggles we were encountering. Such participation allowed us to model how academics continue to write—and continue to struggle with writing—long after they've completed undergraduate degrees. We also joined in the discussion when it was about solutions for writing challenges, which led to opportunities to share further resources. In one session, for example, Stephanie responded to a student's struggle to draft by sharing how helpful she'd found Paul Silvia's *How to Write a Lot*. She offered to share some excerpts with the writing group, e-mailing a chapter to them the following day. In addition, as Silvia was coming to speak to our Writing



Center staff the following week, this conversation with her writing group led Stephanie to invite all senior-thesis writing group members to join the Writing Center staff for Silvia's visit. In ways like this, we were able to share a range of resources with the students. Overall, amping up our involvement simply through being more present allowed us to act as resources that writers could tap into for additional support. More importantly, our presence allowed us to identify and respond to needs for such support—even when the students themselves might not have thought to ask for assistance. This support role could easily slip into back-seat driving if we were constantly present at group meetings offering unsolicited advice. But periodically checking in on group meetings throughout the semester led to opportunities for students to ask for advice, and for us to offer it, without negating the students' autonomy.

Given another year in the coordinators' roles, we would have expanded our involvement by offering students a menu of additional options: pre-writing approaches, revision strategies, information on disciplinary writing conventions, time management tips, and more. Based on their requests or our suggestions of what groups might find helpful, we would also offer brief presentations or workshops as part of the group meetings. And we would follow up individually with participants who sought more support. Finally, we would gather more feedback each semester through conversations and periodic surveys to determine whether we were responding fully to group members' needs. Rather than prescribing readings or curricula from the outset, we would respond specifically to both the needs writers express and the needs that we identify through our interactions with each group. In these ways, writing center coordinators can encourage group autonomy while also putting our expertise to use, capitalizing on our unique position to provide an insider and outsider perspective.

Our students' surveys make clear that "an audience that understands" is a peer audience—one engaged in the same writing task, on the same timeline, with the same stresses. There is tremendous value for peer writing groups to stimulate "critical and creative" thinking and learning, as our student observed. Accordingly, we embrace the autonomy that grows from our groups and reject coordinator-generated policies that replace or override a group's decisions; in writing-center sponsored peer writing groups, students belong in the driver's seat. But rather than being wary of back-seat driving, we argue that writing center coordinators have a vital role in teaching students to drive their writing groups by providing direction along the way.



#### Works Cited

- Bruffee, Kenneth A. "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *Landmark Essays On Writing Centers*. Ed. Christina Murphy and Joe Law. Davis: Hermagoras, 1995. 87-98. Print.
- Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.
- . *Writing Without Teachers*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Gere, Anne Ruggles. *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987. Print.
- Girgensohn, Katrin. "Mutual Growing: How Student Experience Can Shape Writing Centers." *Journal of Academic Writing* 2.1 (2012): 127-137. Web.
- Jackson, Rebecca, and Jackie Grutsch McKinney. "Beyond Tutoring: Mapping the Invisible Landscape of Writing Center Work." *Praxis* 9.1 (2012): 1-11. Web.
- Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor, 1995. Print.
- Lee, Sohui, and Chris Golde. "Completing the Dissertation and Beyond: Writing Centers and Dissertation Boot Camps." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 37.7-8 (2013): 1-5. Web.
- Moss, Beverly J., Nels P. Highberg, and Melissa Nicolas. *Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004. Print.
- Silvia, Paul J. *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*. Washington: American Psychological Association, 2007. Print.



### WLN Blog News

Josh Ambrose, *WLN* Blog Editor, offers us a preview of what will be appearing on the blog <writinglabnewsletter.org/blog>:

- An interview with Violeta Molina Natera (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Cali, Cali, Colombia).
- A blog post about some of the European writing center networks, by Steffen Guenzel, *WLN* Associate Blog Editor.
- A brief history of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*.
- A Call in January for writing centers overseas to share photos of their spaces on Twitter, with a hashtag so they can be archived.
- Blog post in February from McDaniel College (Westminster, MD, USA) Writing Center tutors about working overseas and an invitation to more tutors to discuss this.

A sampling of other in-progress projects:

- An interview with Jeffrey Mkhize, who is starting a writing center at the University of Zululand.
- Networking series—tutors and staff in writing centers will be invited to hold Skype conversations across borders to talk about their work with each other.
- What are our alumni doing? An invitation for former tutors to share a quick snippet of how their writing center experience has informed their professional lives after graduation.
- More interviews with people working in writing centers around the world.

If you have suggestions for future topics for the blog and/or wish to contribute, contact Josh Ambrose: <jambrose@mcdaniel.edu>.

# ANNOUNCEMENTS

## Job Announcements

- Writing Center Director  
Trine University

For the full posting, see <trine.edu/careers/assistant-professor-writing-center-director.aspx>.

- Writing Center Director  
Stetson University

Megan O'Neill, the Chair of the Search Committee, is happy to answer inquiries at <mboneill@stetson.edu>.

The full job description can be found here: <www.stetson.edu/other/employment/faculty-opportunities.php>.

See job listing #1436.

- Writing Center Administrator  
Northwestern University in Qatar

To apply, please go to <www.northwestern.edu/hr/careers>. Click on External Applicants, use keyword Qatar, and click on the job title.

- Reading-Writing Center and Digital Studio Director  
Florida State University

Contact Prof. Kathleen Yancey, Search Committee Chair, Dept. of English, Florida State University, Tallahassee FL 32306-1580.

- Writing Center Director  
College of St. Benedict/ St. John's University

See the job listing: <apps.csbsju.edu/employment/default.aspx?page=jobs>.

## BUILDING PROFESSIONAL SCHOLARS: THE WRITING CENTER AT THE GRADUATE LEVEL

◆ Heather Blain Vorbies

*University of Maryland, College Park, MD (former university)*

*University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC (current university)*

Few writing center directors would be surprised to hear that “explicit [writing] instruction for graduate students remains a rarity” (Micciche 47) or that “Most academic departments assume that their graduate students possess basic writing competency when they are admitted” (Snively, Freeman, and Prentice 154). Nor would they be surprised by panicked graduate students pleading for writing help. A lack of graduate writing instruction, compounded by an assumption of writing mastery, can place writing centers in a difficult position. Graduate faculty may resist classroom writing instruction, feeling that it is or should be unnecessary. And with little or no explicit instruction for graduate students, writing centers may be one of only a few resources or the only available resource for writing instruction. Thus, as populations of graduate students, especially international graduate students, grow, and as job markets become ever more competitive, writing centers are called to aid and adapt for this underserved population. In response to this need, the University of Maryland (UMD) Graduate School launched the Graduate Writing Initiatives, a set of initiatives which includes a graduate writing center, departmental workshops, language learner support, faculty support, and classroom instruction.

For many graduate students, the heart of these writing initiatives—the place where students get direct, one-to-one support—is the Graduate School Writing Center (GSWC). The GSWC is largely based on Northwestern University's Graduate Writing Place. This model uses a select group of writing consultants, who, in addition to consulting, complete writing-in-the-disciplines projects for their own departments. At UMD, for example, consultants are Writing Fellows as they receive a research fellowship, rather than an hourly wage or stipend. The Graduate School supplies Fellows with funding for conference and research travel, equipment, books, or even software. Additionally, like University of California, Los Angeles's Graduate Writing Center, which recruits consultants from across disciplines, the GSWC wanted Fellows to represent a wide disciplinary range.<sup>1</sup> Although about half of the Fellows come from the Humanities, the other represented disciplines are equally spread across the Social Sciences and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. The GSWC follows a peer-tutoring model, using graduate students (typically Ph.D. and post-candidacy) as Fellows. The GSWC director selects the Fellows from faculty nominations based on exceptional disciplinary performance, eloquent writing, and an enthusiasm for working with other graduate students. In addition, the director chooses Fellows with their roles as emissaries to their own departments and disciplines in mind. During the semesters in which they consult, Fellows hold one-to-one writing consultations, co-facilitate workshops, and develop a writing-in-the-disciplines project. Based on the GSWC's experiences, and my role as former director, I have three key suggestions for graduate writing centers:

1. Graduate writing centers must treat graduate writers as professionals.
2. Tutors should have disciplinary genre expertise.
3. Graduate students benefit from alternative consulting models.

## GRADUATE WRITING CENTERS MUST TREAT GRADUATE WRITERS AS PROFESSIONALS

During graduate programs, students transition from “student” to “professional scholar.” This transition is a bumpy and difficult road, as Paul Prior and others (Casanave; Berkenkotter and Huckin; Phillips) have demonstrated. To aid this transition, the GSWC is designed as a professional space. The first step towards this professional design was locating a space physically separate from the areas that undergraduates generally traffic. Luckily, the Graduate School and the UMD Libraries were able to place the GSWC on the fifth floor of the main library, a quiet floor with little traffic and three floors up from the busy and boisterous Terrapin Learning Commons. Next, it was essential to create a professional feel with the furnishings, as, after all, it can be difficult to conceive of yourself as a professional when you are sitting in classroom-style chairs. For this reason, the GSWC's furniture reflects the design of the Administration Building and the Robert H. Smith Business School, using flex-use furniture with warm woods and simple fabrics. In addition, the GSWC offers a single-serve pod coffee machine, an admittedly small touch that changes the feel of the space significantly. With this design, the GSWC's goal is to impress upon clients as they walk in the door that they are more than graduate stu-

dents: they are professional scholars, and their writing needs to reflect this. In addition to providing a professional space, graduate writing centers coach graduate students in what it means to be a professional scholar. When the Fellows work with clients, they come armed with lists of online reference managers, draft managers, time managers, and organization managers.<sup>2</sup> Early on it became clear that graduate writing in great part wasn't about writing: graduate students need to know how to effectively manage long-term projects, large amounts of data, and motivation. And while these problems are similar to those facing undergraduates, the larger scale of graduate projects, combined with a lack of guidance and supervision, makes for an entirely different experience. Fellows also know that a certain portion of consultation time, or in some cases, all of it, will inevitably be spent coaching clients in containing the anxiety and the desire to procrastinate. Another significant part of professionalism for graduate students is navigating complex student-faculty relationships. What should a client do, for example, when disagreements between members of the committee are delaying dissertation completion? Graduate writing centers must be prepared to coach clients through such problems, ideally in conjunction with other graduate student services (UMD, for example, has an excellent dissertation support group). Many times this coaching simply means providing a safe space for clients to talk about these problems, but it can also mean helping clients understand faculty comments and helping clients brainstorm better ways to communicate with committee members. In such situations, the director might meet with the student before the consultant does. These meetings are useful in gauging which consultant might work best with the client and can be followed by a discussion of possible consultation techniques with the client's assigned Fellow. For instance, when a client was having difficulty moving from reporting to engaging in the scholarly conversation, the Fellow devised staggered writing tasks that moved from analyzing one article to analyzing how a group of articles were speaking to each other.

## TUTORS SHOULD HAVE DISCIPLINARY GENRE EXPERTISE

With 288 graduate programs at UMD, each with their own disciplinary expectations, the Fellows' training needed to address writing in the disciplines (WID). This is no small task considering the countless specialties within disciplines; indeed, it would be impossible to supply Fellows with content expertise in every discipline and sub-discipline. For this reason, the GSWC uses a genre-based approach to help Fellows gain disciplinary writing expertise for themselves. Just as essential, this genre-based approach to tutoring provides Fellows with a way to make implicit writing expectations explicit to their clients. As Catherine Savini notes, consultants "can best serve their students by showing them how to gain access to new disciplines" (3). Sue Dinitz and Susanmarie Harrington support this viewpoint as they distinguish between disciplinary expertise (knowing what a chemistry article looks like and does) and content knowledge (knowing the structure of gold nanoparticles). Dinitz and Harrington found that tutors with disciplinary expertise were able focus on global, rather than local concerns; in contrast, "Many of the limitations we noted in sessions related to directiveness, with the tutor's lack of disciplinary expertise causing them not to be directive enough or the tutor's content knowledge causing them to be too directive" (94). Dinitz's and Harrington's research mirrors daily experience within the GSWC. While a Fellow within the discipline may be able to highlight inaccuracies and provide more insight into the discipline's writing, working with a Fellow from outside the discipline ensures that the client will be required to discuss how the writing is working conceptually. In following a genre-based approach, consultants seek to understand how academic disciplines think and write. While consultants should be able to analyze a genre, consultants do not necessarily need to know the discipline intimately. In other words, a consultant should be aware that conventions exist (for example, the many variations of the IMRAD structure in the sciences which generally includes the abstract, introduction, methods, results, and discussions), but a consultant does not need to be a chemist in order to work with someone in chemistry. As Pemberton notes, "a writing tutor's unfamiliarity with discourse conventions can be seen as one of his or her greatest strengths" (376). In fact, when offered the choice of working with a Fellow from the same discipline or a Fellow from outside the discipline, clients frequently prefer a Fellow from outside.<sup>3</sup> Choosing a Fellow outside the discipline can be a social issue (clients may prefer not to work with Fellows from their cohort), or it may be related to the need to protect a certain formula or technical design. Again, while content knowledge can sometimes be helpful in consultations, what is most important is that consultants have disciplinary genre expertise.

Promoting disciplinary genre expertise for consultants means that the Fellows' discipline-specific projects are as important as one-to-one consultation. These projects help the Fellows build genre knowledge within the GSWC

## IWCA SUMMER INSTITUTE

June 14-19, 2015  
Michigan State University  
Kellogg Center  
East Lansing, MI

Co-hosts: Rusty Carpenter:  
<russell.carpenter@eku.edu>;  
Trixie Smith: <smit1254@msu.edu>. The Summer Institute is ideal for current or would-be writing center directors and assistants, writing program administrators, tutors, writing teachers (high school or college), curriculum developers, graduate students, new Ph.D.s, and academic leaders. SI leaders offer presentations and facilitate workshops on a variety of writing center topics.

Fee: \$800, payable at <www.iwcamembers.org>. Scholarships of up to \$650 to cover the cost of lodging (\$118/night) are available. Payment due 10 business days after registration.

Conference website:  
<writingcenters.org/about/iwca-summer-institute/2015-iwca-summer-institute>.

## NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PEER TUTORING IN WRITING

Nov. 5-8, 2015  
Salt Lake City, UT  
Salt Lake Community College and Westminster College  
*"(De)Center: Testing Assumptions about Peer Tutoring and Writing Centers"*  
Keynote speaker: Jackie Grutsch McKinney

Conference chairs: Clint Gardner; Chris LeCluyse Andrea Malouf.  
Conference website: <nctpw2015.org/>.

writing center and they help individual departments better understand the writing in their fields. As part of their service, Fellows independently design WID projects for their departments, from a workshop on grant writing for public health, to a website on getting an article published for Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies, and to a pamphlet on writing a phenomenological dissertation for Education. Many of these WID projects have arisen out of the Fellows' consultation work. In addition, Fellows created the website, designed the logo, and developed materials for an online self-study course.

### GRADUATE STUDENTS BENEFIT FROM ALTERNATIVE CONSULTING MODELS

GSWC consultations differ significantly from much of writing center practice in two ways. First, Fellows comment directly on the draft (clients receive an electronic copy of this commented draft at the end of the appointment, along with a short note of what was discussed). Particularly useful at the graduate level, written comments allow Fellows to shape the consultation around global concerns while respecting clients' sentence-level concerns. I have observed that when clients know they will receive a commented-on document at the end of the session, Fellows can more easily guide clients who fixate again and again on individual sentences into broader discussions of the document and the client's research. Indeed, written comments seem to relieve a great deal of anxiety on the part of the client. In any case, when commenting, Fellows follow the same guidelines for written comments as those they use for consultation. The Fellows ask many questions and respond as a reader, but also model sentence structure or wording when appropriate, or explain article use, subject-verb agreement, or vocabulary.

Written comments also reflect the GSWC's commitment to its language learner clients, for whom written comments supplement oral comments. Whether in written comments or in face-to-face consultation, Fellows act as cultural informants for international students and language learners, checking for meaning and suggesting alternate wordings. Fellows may adjust their tutoring style to be more directive at certain points when open-ended questions and comments may be troublesome for a language learner client. As Frances Nan points out, "Tutors must be prepared to first make direct changes for writers while modeling specific examples before expecting them to flourish under the usual indirection" (56). Thus, when Fellows provide a few options of how a sentence might be structured, clients find it much easier to try out new sentence patterns and suggest wordings of their own. Here, I agree with Clark and Healy that forbidding imitation within consultations limits learning (251). I also agree with the sage advice of Sarah Nakamaru that when working with language learners, "It's OK to tell them" (106). Second, longer, more complex writing means that the traditional appointment time of forty-five minutes or fifty minutes is often inadequate, as Summers notes (204). For this reason, GSWC blocks two hours for every appointment, with the first hour allotted to the Fellow for reading the client's draft and commenting on it (up to fifteen pages) and the second hour allotted for consultation. While this is a time-intensive model, this system works well with the GSWC's client population and with these clients' texts, the majority of which are articles for publication and dissertation chapters—long, dense texts which present complicated, layered arguments and precise methods and data analysis. Additionally, although sessions themselves are generally one-hour in length, clients have the option to book back-to-back appointments for a two-hour session. And while some graduate writing centers, such as Northwestern University's Graduate Writing Place, provide clients with the option of having tutors read the work before the consultation, it is the GSWC's standard practice for Fellows to read the work beforehand.

This process, with time allotted before the consultation for Fellows to read, comment, and explore writing samples in the client's discipline, is time-intensive. In the same window that other writing centers may see ten clients, the GSWC sees five. Consultation capacity is certainly diminished because of this, but in the long run I believe this system is more efficient for small centers and for graduate writers. To discuss fifteen pages in a forty-five or fifty-minute session without the tutor reading the dissertation chapter beforehand would likely mean at the least three appointments. This means that a client must visit the center two more times; always a difficult task for tightly scheduled graduate students.



## CONCLUSION

No writing center model is without its limitations. The current funding system (small research fellowships for a two- or four-hour per week tutoring commitment) and subsequent training (six hours, plus monthly professional development) fits well with graduate students' schedules, but leaves much to be desired in terms of the GSWC's available tutoring hours and in terms of training. Unfortunately, a semester-long tutoring course is too great a commitment for many graduate students ("Graduate Writing Place").

Another challenge is recruitment across disciplines. The GSWC's emphasis on WID means there is a continual search for Fellows from fields under-represented in the center, namely Business and STEM fields. In part, the difficulty of recruiting from these fields has to do with an emphasis on time in the lab; while graduate students in the Humanities may be encouraged to seek out teaching opportunities, graduate students in other fields may be encouraged to keep to lab work. In addition, while small research fellowships let the GSWC recruit across disciplines, this funding also means that the majority of Fellows only do one consultation per week. Having some form of graduate assistantship would mean fewer Fellows, but more consultations. Moving toward graduate assistantships or toward a mix of research funding and graduate assistantships may be an option. However, who will fund such assistantships, remains to be seen. Finally, the GSWC might more effectively schedule drop-in hours and consultation times for short documents, such as policy memos or grant proposals, alongside the standard, two-hour blocked consultations. Yet, as the Fellows frequently note, both they and the clients benefit from reading even short texts before the consultation, as even texts of a page or two can be highly complicated. As always, the goal for directors and consultants is easing the difficult transition from student to professional scholar. A writing center based on the GSWC model serves graduate students by supporting disciplinary instruction and also by imbuing a sense of professionalism within the center.



### Notes

1. I would like to thank Marilyn Gray, Brad Hughes, and Leigh Ryan for their conversations and insight.
2. Such as Mendelay or Zotero (citation and PDF managers), Scrivener (draft manager), The Pomodoro Technique (time manager), 750words.com (productivity), or Evernote (organization manager).
3. As Gillespie, Heidebrecht, and Lamascus state, "tutoring peers from within the same graduate discipline can also involve some unique challenges, interesting dynamics, and choppy waters to navigate" (10).



### Works Cited

- Berkenkotter, Carol, and Thomas N. Huckin. *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995. Print.
- Casanave, Christine P. *Writing Games: Multicultural Case Studies of Academic Literacy Practices in Higher Education*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002. Print.
- Clark, Irene L., and Dave Healy. "Are Writing Centers Ethical?" *The Longman Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*. Ed. Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S. Blumner. New York: Pearson Longman, 2008. 242-259. Print.
- Dinitz, Sue, and Susanmarie Harrington. "The Role of Disciplinary Expertise in Shaping Writing Tutorials." *Writing Center Journal* 33.2 (2014): 73-98. Print.
- Gillespie, Paula, Paul Heidebrecht, and Lorelle Lamascus. "From Design to Delivery: The Graduate Writing Consultant Course (Part 2)." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 32.8 (2008): 8-11. Print.
- "Graduate Writing Place." *The Writing Place*. Northwestern University, n.d. Web. 3 Dec. 2014.
- Micciche, Laura. "Rhetorics of Critical Writing: Implications for Graduate Writing Instruction." *College Composition and Communication* 60.3 (2009): 35-48. Print.
- Nakamaru, Sarah. "Theory In/To Practice: A Tale of Two Multilingual Writers: A Case-Study Approach to Tutor Education." *Writing Center Journal* 30.2 (2010): 100-124. Print.

### Works Cited (cont.)

- Nan, Frances. "Bridging the Gap: Essential Issues to Address in Recurring Writing Center Appointments with Chinese ELL Students." *Writing Center Journal* 32.1 (2012): 50-64. Print.
- Pemberton, Michael A. "Rethinking the WAC/ Writing Center Connection." *Longman Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*. Ed. Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S. Blumner. New York: Pearson Longman, 2008. 260-271. Print.
- Phillips, Tallin. "Graduate Writing Groups: Shaping Writing and Writers From Student to Scholar." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* 10.1 (2012): 1-7. Web. 6 Aug. 2013.
- Prior, Paul. *Writing/Disciplinarity: A Sociobistoric Account of Literate Activity in the Academy*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998. Print.
- Savini, Catherine. "An Alternative Approach to Bridging Disciplinary Divides." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 35.7-8 (2011): 2-5. Print.
- Snively, Helen, Traci Freeman, and Cheryl Prentice. "Writing Centers for Graduate Students." *Writing Center Director's Resource Book*. Ed. Christina Murphy and Byron L. Stay. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006. 153-163. Print.
- Summers, Sarah. "Graduate Writing Centers: Programs, Practices, Possibilities." Diss. Pennsylvania State University, 2014. Web. 27 May 2014.



# REFLECTIONS

*Editor's note: When we asked Jeff Brooks to reflect on the reflections of others on his widely-read essay, which appeared in 1991, in Vol. 15.6, of WLN on "Minimalist Tutoring," he responded with the following. For those who are interested in what Jeff Brooks has been doing since his tutoring days, he sends along a short biographical note, included at the end of his "Reflection."*



A few years ago, when my son David was an undergraduate, he e-mailed to say that for his writing course he'd been assigned a reading by an author with my name. "The weird thing is," he wrote, "it kinda sounds like you." His assignment was an essay I wrote when David was a baby: "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work." There was no visible reason he—a freshman and not an English major—should read it; the class wasn't about tutoring or any form of writing pedagogy. It was a standard English 101 writing course. David didn't know why he had to read it either: "The TA assigned it. He didn't say why." That's notoriety: When something you did a long time ago is still out there—and being misused.

I've wondered why such a wispy piece of advice for tutors has had such a shelf-life. It didn't offer anything new: in the writing center where I worked at the time, we talked about that stuff constantly. I offered no research—just experiential advice. From someone with less than three years of experience. The best reason I can think of for the essay's staying power is that it gives a name to something all tutors contend with. The phrase "minimalist tutoring" gives you a place to hang your thoughts and discourse about tutoring and the struggle to do it right. It took me most of my short writing center career to see what the real issue was with those "fix the commas" students: What they wanted was not what they needed, nor what I was supposed to offer. If "Minimalist Tutoring" has helped others move more quickly to that understanding so they can contend with it more effectively, then I'm happy. That's not having the work misused.

## MARKETING THE WRITING CENTER

How many students feel ill-served because writing centers won't just shut up and proofread their papers? How many more never show up because they've heard you won't do that for them? The problem is that what they want (someone to "fix" their paper) is not what they need (help becoming a better writer). You need to persuade them that what you offer really does give them what they want. In fact, it's far more valuable than their felt need for proofreading. But you'll never get that message through by telling them what you don't do. Telling the community that the writing center will not proof their papers is like posting signs that say:

THE WRITING CENTER:

GET LOST!

To get students into the writing center, tell them what the writing center does offer:

- Better grades, not only for this paper, but on all your papers. In fact, better grades in all your classes that use writing in any form, from lab notes to written exams.
- A skill that you will carry with you for the rest of your life—something that will set you apart in any workplace, any career you choose. You'll land better jobs, make more money, have more fun. Really.

In fact, why not physically separate proofreading from the writing center? Set up a Proofreading Center next door. You can staff it with the same people. And those people can constantly give the message that what they're doing is of limited value. The good stuff is next door in the writing center. And charge standard rates for proofreading. If that's all they want, you might as well turn it into a revenue stream!



*Jeff Brooks is the creative director at TrueSense Marketing, a fundraising agency for non-profit organizations. He has served the nonprofit community for more than 25 years, working as a writer and creative director on behalf of top North American nonprofits, including CARE, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, World Vision, Feeding America, Project HOPE, and dozens of urban rescue missions and Salvation Army divisions. He has planned and executed hundreds of campaigns in direct mail, print, radio, the Internet, and other media. He blogs at <futurefundraising-now.com>, podcasts at <fundraisingisbeautiful.com>, and is the author of two books: The Fundraiser's Guide to Irresistible Communications (2012) and The Money-Raising Nonprofit Brand (2014). He lives in Seattle.*



## READERS REFLECT:

I discovered Jeff Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring" this Fall semester as an undergraduate in a tutor writing course. In preparation for my own tutoring, I observed another tutor's sessions at our Writing Center. Throughout the entire session, the minimalist techniques of Brooks were unfolding in practice as they had been presented in theory.

The tutee became frustrated as she struggled to solidify her various arguments into a cohesive thesis. She continued to turn to the tutor and ask for her to craft the argument for her. The tutor put to practice the minimalist tutoring that Brooks presented in his article, and the results were fruitful. The tutor physically disengaged herself from the session, asked open-ended questions, and then allowed the tutee to talk about her ideas aloud. At one point the tutor told the tutee that she didn't know which argument she should choose—this wasn't her paper. By the end of the session, the tutee not only improved her writing, but also gained a new confidence in herself as a writer. As I move forward in my own tutoring, I am constantly cognizant of the value of a minimalist tutoring approach.

*Timothy Conklin*

*University of Massachusetts Amherst  
Amherst, MA*



As an undergraduate tutor at Oberlin College's Writing Center, I think about Jeff Brooks' seminal article quite a bit. His minimalist approach does, of course, have its merits—namely, in making better writers and not necessarily better papers. But Brooks ignores a key reality—over half the students I tutor speak English as a second language. In the last ten years, writing centers have increasingly become a tool for international students seeking sentence-level polishing.

Moreover, many non-ESL students lack enough fluency in academesse to simply intuit the answers to their questions under careful prodding. These students have neither the time nor the fundamental skills to play the roundabout game of minimalism. For example, a student might ask me, "Where should I put this sentence?" The reluctant minimalist, I respond, "What do you think?" The student grows angry: "I don't know. You're the expert." To what extent, then, am I doing a disservice to students by "making them do all the work"? I'm playing a role, withholding answers, passive-aggressively pitting myself against them. Ultimately, then, I use Brooks' piece as a heuristic. Not to be taken as gospel on the job, yet not to be dismissed entirely. Students must, after all, own their writing. But they cannot do so before acquiring the fundamental building blocks of readable prose.

*Owain Heyden*

*Oberlin College  
Oberlin, OH*



Having worked as an Academic Writing Tutor at three United Kingdom-based institutions—Warwick, Coventry and Northampton—and, currently, as a Co-ordinator of writing tutors at Coventry University, I have used and recommended Brooks' article for staff training and development purposes. In Britain, where academic writing instruction is conducted by experienced professional staff, and where universities' preoccupation with quantifiable student-satisfaction data now dominates the pedagogic agenda of all academics, the minimalist tutoring approach advocated by Brooks has encountered a degree of scepticism and opposition. Brooks' central premise of educating the student rather than editing the text holds true and fast, yet the strategies applied are at times radically different.

U.K.-based tutors have been sensitised to students' expectations for skills support and have to balance these against dispensing sound but unpalatable advice. Equally, students' "resistance" in tutorials is seen in the context of inexperience and vulnerability which merit assistance. Thus instead of engaging in 'defensive' tutoring, which may antagonise and alienate, tutors aim to raise academic performance through scaffolding students'

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Tweet WLN? "Like" WLN?

If your writing center and/or tutors have Twitter accounts and/or Facebook pages, we invite you to "follow," "tweet," "like," and/or "post" on our Twitter account and Facebook wall. We invite you to post news of your writing center, photos, online resources, conference notices, other news you wish to share, and links other writing center folk would be interested in.



@WLNewsletter



Writing Lab Newsletter



### International Writing Center Blog

### CONNECTING WRITING CENTERS ACROSS BORDERS

"Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders" is a blog intended for those of you in writing centers around the world to share blog entries, photos, questions, resources, and comments about topics relevant to your work. There is a link on the WLN home page, or connect directly to it at <[www.writinglabnewsletter.org/blog/](http://www.writinglabnewsletter.org/blog/)>.

writing skills. This process includes direct interventions into assignment drafts, which helps learners progress faster through their Zone of Proximal Development toward being independent academic writers.

*Dimitar Angelov*  
*Coventry University*  
*Coventry, UK*

Works Cited

- Attwood, Rebecca. 'Satisfaction and Its Discontents.' *Times Higher Education*. 8 March 2012. Web. 6 Dec. 2014.
- Devet, Bonnie, Susan Orr, Margo Blythman, and Celia Bishop. 'Peering Across the Pond: The Role of Students in Developing Other Students' Writing in the US and UK.' *Teaching Academic Writing in UK Higher Education: Theories, Practices and Models*. Ed. Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 196-211. Print.
- Vygotsky, Lev Semyonovich. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Ed. Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. Print.



I can hardly believe it's been nearly ten years since I first read Jeff Brooks' article in my undergraduate tutor training course. Over the years, I've remembered the title more than the content, perhaps leading me to misremember the article as something less than it is.

Re-reading Brooks now, I am impressed by how much attention he gives to non-verbal communication techniques (*where we sit, how we sit*). Although not explicitly stated, he recognizes tutoring as an embodied activity, and furthermore, he draws attention to the ideological impact and function of such activity. This recognition helps set the stage for the research and scholarship going on around various ideologically valenced and embodied identities, including my own work about sexuality and race. I appreciate Brooks ending his article with hope, looking ahead to "other ideas and tutoring techniques," and am happy to see so many varied conversations—including those around the politics of identification—flourishing.

*Andrew Ribn*  
*Stark State College*  
*Canton, OH*



At an international university where English is a student's second, third, or fourth language, I frequently encounter student writing in which a demonstrated quality of ideas and critical thinking are obscured by sentence-level concerns. There exists a general impression that many of our students are not graduating with the level of English writing proficiency expected by potential employers and graduate schools. With this context in mind, I encourage tutors to read Brooks' article with a critical eye. Although the suggested practices are tried and true, the main claim is misleading. In a shared, collaborative effort, tutors should work just as much as students, if not more: always thinking ahead, preparing mental lists of leading questions or sample sentences to clarify grammar rules, gauging student comprehension. Helping students get a better grasp of sentence-level mechanics, while prioritizing higher-order issues and staying true to the minimalist spirit, requires considerable focus and involvement. In our Writing Center, and perhaps at other English-medium universities abroad, there is a greater need to help students become better writers, and in parallel, help them improve their grammar. Tutors must work to balance the two.

*Emily Cousins*  
*Asian University for Women*  
*Chittagong, Bangladesh*



I remember the moment I discovered that some people think minimalist tutoring is not really relevant anymore. It was during the 2007 IWCA conference in Houston, TX. Muriel Harris, Jeanne Simpson, Pamela Childers, and Joan Mullin led an energetic discussion on minimalist tutoring as a writing center "core assumption." I don't remember all the details of why most people felt so anti-minimalist or why they felt so sure the directive/nondirective continuum had run its pedagogically useful course. But I know one thing for sure: I totally disagreed. I thought "really, guys?" To me, dismissing one of the most-referenced author's ideas in peer tutoring theory and practice was like dismissing Sigmund Freud from discussions of psychology because some of his ideas may seem a little outdated.

Since then, I've written quite a bit about the directive/nondirective continuum. It's influenced how I think about everything involving the teaching and learning of writing, including assignment design and peer response groups and other feedback



strategies. In fact, my forthcoming book *Beyond Dichotomy: Synergizing Writing Center and Classroom Pedagogies* (Parlor Press/The WAC Clearinghouse) uses the directive/nondirective continuum as a theoretical and methodological frame. And—oh yes—I definitely cite Jeff Brooks.

*Steven Corbett  
George Mason University  
Springfield, VA*



My overall view of Jeff Brooks' article and its place in the canon of writing center theory is one of skeptical acceptance. The concept of a minimalist approach and most of the strategy suggestions push undergraduate consultants to shift from "helping friends with their papers" to "tutoring peers and helping them become better writers." Beyond my minor qualms about Defensive Strategies and recommendations against letting the student read the paper aloud, though, I find that rhetorically, "minimalist tutoring" misrepresents the truly collaborative aims of writing center work. Consultants do not sit back and make the student do all the work, at the risk of sounding like authoritative teachers. Rather, they strive to work with the student and create an equal exchange of knowledge that fosters trust and conversation. I do acknowledge that consultants-in-training may adopt a minimalist approach at first in order to adjust to the role, but as they become more comfortable leading sessions, they view their approach as collaborative, working with student writers and looking to share the responsibilities.

*Maria Soriano  
John Carroll University  
University Heights, OH*



When I was applying for colleges, I had no writing center to run my essays by. I turned instead to my older brother, who was already in his sophomore year of college. He wasn't readily available, so I e-mailed him my essays and in turn he sent back documents marked up with red comments and suggestions. He did most of the work in editing the papers. And yet, I learned more from his insightful comments on ways I could improve my writing by just reading through them than I felt any high school course had really taught me about writing. I still use his advice when writing papers now, two years later.

The point is, simply editing a paper can be beneficial. Brooks' condemnation of taking on an editorial role is a bit harsh. I disagree that editing is "of little service" to a student, because I believe, in my own experience as a student and more recently a coach, that thoughtful editorship can benefit a student, depending on the way a student learns. For me, that learning process happened organically when I read the comments provided by my brother on my own, in quiet, and without a coach at my side. I think this may be indicative of an Internet generation, whose learning often happens alone and in front of a computer. For another student, it may be the complete opposite. While I have found that taking a step back and allowing students to make their own changes is one of the more powerful ways to coach, I don't think the pure editor position should be totally and wholeheartedly denounced, especially in the age of the Internet.

*Erica Corder  
Virginia Tech  
Blacksburg, VA*



Jeff Brooks' article was the primary source of the guidelines and modus operandi that I set out for the one-to-one tutoring sessions in the young writing center I founded two years ago. Because of its simplicity, conciseness and practicality, I have been using this article in tutor training for a long time. Furthermore, this excellent article helped me propagate the philosophy of my writing center—and that of many writing centers around the globe—which revolves around showing students what to enhance or change in their writing, and not acting as their private editors. As a novice writing teacher, I found the inspirational ideas presented in this article helped me develop some sort of a 'writing autonomy' in my EEL students. Brooks' article is, in my view, an exceptional road-map toward writing center success.

*Djalal Tebib  
University Constantine 1  
Constantine, Algeria*



# TUTOR'S COLUMN

## BLURRING MY BOUNDARIES: INSIGHTS FROM TUTORING A STUDENT WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

◆ Amy Whitcomb

*University of Idaho, Moscow, ID (former university)*

*University of Washington Tacoma, Tacoma, WA (current university)*

There exists an odd and special balance between a student's trust in her tutor and the tutor's quiet refusal to take responsibility for the student's writing. I feel this is especially so with a student who literally cannot see the pages that he or she is submitting for a grade or formal evaluation. When my supervisor, the director of the writing center at the University of Idaho, asked me to tutor a graduate student on a satellite campus who was visually impaired, I agreed—but with reservations. How could I maintain my personal imperative to concentrate on higher-order concerns with this student (I'll call her Susan) who needed, most immediately, a pair of eyes to check her document formatting? The rhetorical effects of presentation aside, I had considered formatting primarily outside of the writing process: a step done after the heavy lifting of thinking, drafting, thinking, revising. This perspective is more or less in keeping with conventional tutoring philosophy to focus on the process instead of the product. As I interpreted this philosophy, my objective as a tutor was to ask purposeful questions and model writerly practices, to expand students' thoughts about their writing choices. When students approached me with pleas (always pleas, last-minute panicked e-mails) for help with formatting, I routinely referred them to the Microsoft Word help toolbar and to the College of Graduate Studies Thesis Handbook. I wanted the final writing product to stay in the students' hands; besides, I reasoned, technical assistance was not my strength. But serving students was my task, and as my supervisor reminded me, Susan was trying to make the best use of the limited resources available to her.

I often asked students on satellite campuses to send me an introductory e-mail explaining their needs and timeline before I reviewed their writing. Susan and I did this initial "meeting" by phone. We determined that she would e-mail her documents to me with some explanation of the assignment and her concerns ahead of our next call, when we would discuss formatting and other writing issues. Susan seemed as overwhelmed as any graduate student I'd worked with in the writing center: there was so much reading, she told me, hours of reading each day. She thought probably her writing was too "flowery" for the social science articles expected of her. Her professor was a stickler about APA style. But she was giddy, too, thrilled to be on a new career path in her late 40s, eager to learn, supremely grateful for my attention to her work. I warmed to her instantly.

We couldn't have known that we'd speak every week for two semesters, working through multiple assignments for her four classes. In our conversations, I'd read problematic passages aloud and we'd discuss them—as in any other tutorial. Yet I often felt uncomfortable with my approach. When I introduced the passages so Susan could situate the sentences in her memory of the paper as a whole (and this, I learned quickly, was something she could do very well), I tended to mention what I saw as the writing problem within them. Here I had trouble with the word order, I might say, or I'm not sure I understand how the first part of this sentence fits with the second part. I worried that I wasn't allowing Susan the mental space to develop self-editing skills that she would need in her graduate and professional careers. But my anxieties about being too forward were usually unfounded. I'd say, "This sentence has a dangling modifier . . .," and Susan would reply, "Oh, I had trouble with that one!" or, later in our work together, "I knew you were going to say something about that phrase!" I learned that Susan could easily identify when her writing was "off"; she had a perceptive ear for tone and rhythms in language and a knack for immediately supplying alternate phrasing or other revisions. Eventually, what surprised me about our tutorials wasn't how readily Susan revised her language over the phone, but how happily I typed her words into the document on my computer and formatted them in accordance with her assignment. In our months working together, we revised her weekly journal entries for class, a plethora of article reviews, some fictitious case reports, resumes, even a schematic of her life history as an Excel spreadsheet. The document was easier to read in landscape orientation than in the portrait orientation Susan's program had chosen by default, but how was she to know that? By this time in our relationship, I had no reservations about helping with document formatting and breaking my own tutoring "rule." I knew Susan was learning plenty about writing from our discussions.

And I was learning about writing from Susan, too. I thought I was a close reader and slow writer, but when Susan told me that she had to set her document reading program to speak each character on the screen in order to catch errors like “&” for “and” or “Brian” for “Bryan” (her professor’s name! She was mortified when I told her about that one), I reconsidered my writing process. What would it be like to hold a whole essay in my head, to lay it out slowly and clearly enough for a machine to get it right? Such details about the circumstances of Susan’s writing were revelations to me. She’s told me that the writing’s perfection is largely from trial and error. Working with me has given her opportunities to make mistakes, test corrections, and get the detailed feedback that informs her where, exactly, she went wrong in her navigations through Microsoft Word functions. As evidence, she cites her ability to now independently insert running headers with page numbers, a process she and I tinkered with over several weeks by narrating our respective steps through Word to each other.

Recently I searched for articles about blindness and writing centers and found only one, “Assisting the Visually Impaired in the Writing Center,” written by Karin Sisk and published in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* in 2001. (To be sure, other articles on similar subjects, mostly written about or for elementary education and literacy, appeared in the databases I searched.) If I had read Sisk’s article before working with Susan, I might have been, or felt, better prepared for our meetings. For instance, Sisk describes the “duty” tutors feel to address both format and error in the writing of a student with impaired vision. She mentions JAWS, something Susan said a handful of times before I placed it as “Job Access With Speech,” a document reading program. I realize now that my experience with Susan mirrors much of what Sisk described more than a decade ago about her tutors’ work with students who have visual impairments. For example, Susan and I revised her writing in real time, on a screen. We kept a standing appointment, and Susan worked exclusively with me. I cringed every time I said, automatically, “See you later!” but such statements never seemed to bother her. Susan and I, like Sisk’s tutors and students, were collaborators and friends.

Where did Susan’s profound trust in me come from? I think of myself as a student meeting with professors, nodding at their suggestions and sensing the good intentions behind them. I’m grateful that Susan sensed my good intentions and that I, as a tutor, accepted the challenges her blindness presented—and the insights they offered. There are many: I shouldn’t jump into and plow ahead in a tutorial based on what I see. I shouldn’t skip the step of asking the student about her writing and listening closely to her answers. I may hear about what I already saw as the writing’s weaknesses, but I will likely also hear what the student hopes and fears about the text and why.

Above all, conversations with Susan convinced me that document formatting was a meaningful issue to students and changed how I approach it in a tutorial. I realized that we tutors are positioned to help students uncover what it takes to get their thoughts into text and into a form that resonates with others. When we can focus on the connection between the students and their readers (and between us and the students), then we’ve effectively kept comprehensive, fundamental concerns about writing at the forefront of the tutorial. And we can assist in ways that seemed directive, perhaps, or superfluous before. Trust conversation and collaboration, tutors; trust engagement and adaptation; trust that the obstacles will be opportunities and that the written words generated from them will be correctly formatted; yes, and telling. ♦

#### Works Cited

Sisk, Karin. “Assisting the Visually Impaired in the Writing Center.” *Writing Lab Newsletter* 25.7 (2001): 6-9. Print.



*THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER* IS ABOUT TO CHANGE NAMES!

**WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship: Volume 40 | Sept. 2015**

## CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

**February 12-14, 2015:** South Central Writing Centers Association, in Austin, TX

**Contact:** <abatt@austin.utexas.edu>;  
Conference website: <scwca.net>/.



**February 19-21, 2015:** Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Nashville, TN

**Contact:** Stacia Watkins <stacia.watkins@lipscomb.edu>; Conference website: <www.iwca-swca.org/Conferences.html>.



**February 28, 2015:** Southern California Writing Centers Association Peer Tutoring, in La Jolla, CA

**Contact:** Madeleine Picciotto: <mpicciotto@ucsd.edu>; Conference website: <sandbox.socalwritingcenters.org/2015-tutor-conference/>.



**April 10-11, 2015:** East Central Writing Centers Association, in Notre Dame, IN

**Contact:** Matthew Capdevielle: <matthew.capdevielle@nd.edu>;  
Conference website: <ecwca.org/>.



**April 10-11, 2015:** Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Harrisonburg, VA

**Contact:** Jared Jay Featherstone: <feathejj@jmu.edu>; Conference website: <mawcaconference.wix.com/mawca2015>.



**April 18-19, 2015:** Northeast Writing Centers Association, in Hackettstown, NJ

**Contact:** Richard Severe: <severer@centenarycollege.edu>; Conference website: <www.centenarycollege.edu/collaboratory>.

