

## 12 Talking about Writing: The Role of the Writing Lab

Diana Freisinger  
Michigan Technological University

Jill Burkland  
Michigan Technological University

In order for writing across the curriculum to work effectively, the program must provide a strong referral service for faculty in all disciplines. This referral service is most commonly a writing lab. Tutors in the writing lab can and do serve as professional consultants for those faculty who do not consider themselves qualified to teach writing or even to diagnose writing problems accurately. In order to use this service effectively referring instructors must understand the unique position held by writing tutors working with students across disciplines. Those of us who train tutors for this position must prepare them for one of the most difficult jobs on campus.

Anyone who has ever taught in a writing lab or worked extensively with one-on-one instruction knows that on-the-spot evaluation is the most challenging and frustrating part of the job. Unlike classroom teachers who can read and evaluate student essays in the privacy of their studies, the tutor must, with the student looking on, read, evaluate, and decide on an effective course of instruction, all in a matter of minutes. This problem is compounded by school-wide referrals. Most students referred to the lab from disciplines other than English come with almost no idea of what went wrong with their writing. Referring instructors do not consider themselves writing teachers. Although they are in the best position to judge student writing in their discipline, they have very little or no time to spend discussing the process of writing a particular kind of paper. Since they are not prepared to evaluate the student's writing problems, they mark what they can and send the student to the lab for a more careful evaluation and instruction in writing.

The techniques used to evaluate stacks of essays from classes are not appropriate in the unprotected environment of the tutor/student conference. Tutor evaluation is different from classroom evaluation. After all, the students are coming from classes which are *using* but not *teaching* writing.

Both teacher and tutor see evaluation as an instructional process but in very different ways. A teacher's assessment of a student's work is usually the last step in an assignment. The paper is a demonstration of how well the student can use new skills or express understanding of new ideas. The student's writing is of secondary concern. Tutors, however, read a student paper *not* in terms of a lesson they have tried to teach, but as they would read any piece of writing for the first time. They read critically but without specific expectations.

Tutors haven't the emotional investment in the student's paper that the teacher has. Tutors have not given the assignment or spent hours teaching the material to be covered in the paper. As teachers we may get angry when we see students do something in their writing that we have warned against; we do not like to have our lessons ignored. Such teacher reactions affect evaluations and grades, and they should. The tutor can offer a different perspective. The tutor-student relationship is less threatening because grades and egos are less intrusive. Tutors evaluate papers-in-progress, not finished products. Their evaluations are not final judgments but starting places in their work with the students. Tutors read papers asking themselves, not "What grade does this deserve?" but rather, "Where do we begin in our work to make this a good paper?"

The objectivity a tutor brings to the evaluation process is important. It is also difficult. Tutors must shed their sense of grade consciousness and their own biases about what constitutes "good writing." They have to teach toward writing that is acceptable to teachers from all pedagogical schools and all disciplines. It is a humbling position, for tutors are working with a student to write a paper that will not only satisfy the two of them but will earn a good grade from that student's teacher. They must keep in mind an assignment that is not their own, standards that they may not share, and formats they may be unfamiliar with, and they must never reveal to the student any disagreement they may have with the teacher's methods or grades.

Students are likely to accept their tutors' criticisms and suggestions gratefully, without becoming defensive, simply because the tutor does not hold the power position of grade-giver. Because tutors do not give assignments or make final judgments, students see them more as helpers than evaluators. Therein lies the unique strength of this very delicate working relationship.

## Identifying Cross-Disciplinary Goals

In order to describe the tutor/student process and the role the writing lab can play in the writing-across-the-curriculum program, the following student paper will serve as our basis for discussion:

### Innovations of a Decade

Inventions of the seventies have gone through many changes and trends. I cannot mention every invention that was created, for that would take at least a book to cover all of them, but I will highlight on a few. I would also like to explain the sudden decrease of inventions and the people that created them.

Inventions, or innovations, as some insist, of the early 1970s, were built to make modern living much easier. The Ultimate Duck Blind was one such invention, invented in 1970.<sup>1</sup> A fiberglass shell built into the ground, contained a swivel bucket seat with a heater underneath. How's that for comfortable hunting? There is even one made for your hunting dog.

One-man transportation devices were a big thing of the early 1970s. Helicopter kits, underwater sleds for divers, and hovercrafts were very popular. Articles such as these were mainly available to people who had nothing else to do with their money.

Many of the things developed, we use today as very normal devices. Digital watches, telephone answering devices, and mini-cassettes came to light about 1971. Expanding mobile homes and portable toilets helped out our traveling needs. Another traveling device was the cruise controls on automobiles. Luxury items such as electric mittens, vests, and socks kept the outdoorsman warm. The Magicube from Sylvania, a flashbulb that fires without batteries, is used by a great number of people today.

The mid-seventies were concentrated more on anti-pollution devices and safety.

The "electric car" of 1975 created a stunning impact on automobile manufacturing.<sup>2</sup> The front-wheel drive vehicle had a top speed of 55 mph. It was powered by eighteen 6-volt lead-acid batteries, which gave the car a range of approximately 100 miles. The operating costs were estimated between two and three cents per mile.

Two inventions that protected the safety of drivers, were air bags in cars, which cushioned the driver in case of collision, and the Breathalyzer Test, which determined the amount of alcohol a driver had consumed.

Another trend in which energy conservation was introduced, made woodstoves very popular, and many new and different types were developed.

Toward the late 1970s, inventors went back to making life easier. In 1977, a "tiny television"<sup>3</sup> was introduced. The TV had a two-inch screen, that had a shade for outdoor use. Watching the small black and white screen up close had the same effect on your eyes as watching a 24-inch screen from 12 feet away. It's two antennas could pick up stations from an unbelievable distance.

Also, people were calling for things that lasted. General Electric then came out with the ten dollar light bulb. "That bulb," says GE, "will burn 5,000 hours (estimated life: five years) and use one-third the energy of existing incandescent household lights."<sup>4</sup> It would save a person about twenty dollars over its five-year life span.

Throughout the seventies, inventing and inventors themselves have decreased rapidly, and have been replaced by large corporation institutes mainly because the Supreme Court is making tougher and tougher standards of patentability for inventions.

Michael Wolff, an author of many articles in *Science Digest*, has this to say about independent inventors:

A little Yankee ingenuity, years of devotion to a principle, unyielding commitment to success, and personal financial risk—sometimes it's hard to find one of these traits in one man. Find them all and you have found one of a rare breed that's getting rarer—the independent inventor.<sup>5</sup>

The Watermill Superfrank Multi-Hot-Dog Machine, the floating golf-ball retriever, the lifesaving escape chute, the Nothingness Battery Bicycle Turn Signal, the Solar Bottle, the painless syringe, the Kosher Ablution Groovy Solution portable sauna health kit, the Lazy Man's Sleeping Bag, the Illuminated Disco Shoe, and the Laminated Fountain Toothbrush with Barrier—inventions like these will still be around in the years to come, but they are becoming fewer and fewer. With the help of federal regulations and unfair court procedures, the independent inventor may soon become an extinct specie.

#### Endnotes

1. Paul Wahl, "The Ultimate duck Blind," *Popular Science*, July 1970, p. 30
2. Herber Shuldiner, "Electric car," *Popular Science*, Nov. 1975, p. 58
3. David Scott, "Tiny Television," *Popular Science*, March 1978, p. 184
4. R. L. Stepler, "\$10 Light Bulb," *Popular Science*, Sept. 1979, p. 60
5. Michael F. Wolff, "Independent Inventors," *Science Digest*, Sept. 1975, pp. 44-47

At a recent writing-across-the-curriculum workshop, writing tutors and professors from such diverse fields as English, engineering, math, geology, and nursing were given this paper to read and evaluate. Their instructions were to assume that the paper was written for their class and, under that assumption, to make a list of the qualities of the paper that they found acceptable. They were then asked to identify unacceptable areas. Finally, they were to rank the problem areas from most to least serious.

The results of this exercise were both surprising and reassuring. Tutors and professors from all disciplines agreed that the paper in-

cluded a good variety of interesting facts, details, and examples of recent inventions and that spelling and mechanics were generally adequate. Interestingly, only one person, a tutor, mentioned documentation. She found it adequate. Others simply ignored it when making their lists. The two major problem areas were pinpointed as "too broad a topic" and "unclear thesis." The first paragraph was seen as too general. The author mentions three rather vague directions the paper might take. Phrases such as "many changes and trends" and "highlighted a few" are keys to this lack of thesis. From there, readers agreed that the paper also needed work in organization, development of ideas, paragraphing, and transitions. Several readers also recognized as a problem the lack of a consistent voice. They specifically mentioned that the student's comment, "How's that for comfortable hunting?" was jarringly informal and out of place. There was virtually complete agreement on these lists, which surprised everyone involved. Apparently, we were all setting the same criteria for good writing. In this exercise and throughout the workshop, content and organization were consistently mentioned as most important considerations not only by English teachers but by teachers across the curriculum.

Given this agreement on goals, then, how can we best teach good writing in the writing lab? Most teachers outside English agreed that, when reading a student paper, they are most likely to mark errors in spelling or punctuation. As we have seen from the above example, these instructors are aware of more complex problems, but they usually do not have the time or the confidence to advise students in more complicated areas of writing, such as topic selection, statement of thesis, development of ideas, and organization. These areas should be the focus of writing tutors.

### **The Tutoring Session**

How might a tutor, faced with a student and his paper, "Innovations of a Decade," go about tackling the writing problems it presents? In order to make an accurate assessment, the tutor must carefully take the following steps: Talk, Read, Praise, Question, and Decide on a course of instruction. In the best of circumstances, most conferences are limited to one hour or less, so the tutor must take these steps quickly.

#### *Talk*

One advantage the classroom teacher has in the student conference situation is foreknowledge. The teacher has the student in class, has probably read the student's work before, has made the assignment, and

probably knows what to expect from both the student and the assignment. In certain courses, such as engineering and chemistry, the instructor also has a much clearer understanding of the content the paper is to cover and the language the student should be using. The tutor rarely has this advantage. Most tutors work with students they have never met on assignments they have never seen. Therefore, the first step in evaluating any student's essay is to talk to the student about the assignment. Tutors never simply read the paper first.

For years researchers like James Britton, Nancy Martin, Neil Postman and Charles Weingarten, Thom Hawkins, Ken Bruffee, and Peter Elbow have reminded us of the value of talk as a means of learning.<sup>1</sup> Classroom teachers often lament how few students do talk. These teachers understand how valuable it is for students to verbalize their thoughts, their discoveries. This kind of talk is what Britton and others call "shaping at the point of utterance."

Tutors offer many students the rare opportunity to talk as much as they want about what is bothering them about a paper, what they meant to say, and what they now see as something they could add. It really does not matter that what the student is saying may be obvious to the tutor, if it is a discovery to that student. Some students are unaware of how much they know until they start talking. Tutors often find themselves working with students who can talk for an hour, give interesting examples, and suggest unique ways of developing the topic and yet, in the end, cannot put these examples or ideas into writing. Tutors who pay attention to, take notes on, even tape record conversations are able to point out to these students how much they actually have to say. Tutors must, then, begin by trusting the students' own sense of themselves as writers.

In order to discover what these students need now, tutors must first find out what students think the assignment was, how they feel about their own writing, and what they would like to work on with this paper. Most students are much more candid with a tutor than they are with their own teachers. Quite frequently, they are also amazingly apt at spotting the real weaknesses in their own writing. They know what most of the problems are and where they occur. They simply do not know how to solve these problems.

Working with the essay above, a typical session might begin with the following kind of dialogue:

Tutor: Can you tell me a little about the assignment?

Student: Well, we were supposed to write about the seventies.

Tutor: Just anything about the seventies? Why did you choose inventions?

Sometimes the student has very clear reasons for choosing the subject. On the other hand, with this paper the student had simply discovered a list of inventions in *Popular Science* and *Science Digest* and could see the possibility of focusing on scientific inventions through the decade. That made sense to him. He had limited his topic, had done the research, and he was taking an approach the rest of the class would probably not take. This is just the kind of information tutors need before making any kind of judgment about a paper.

About possible problems, the dialogue would go something like this:

Tutor: Okay. How do you feel about the paper? Did you have any particular problems writing it?

Student: She told us that we had to have a thesis, and I don't think I have one and I can't get all my facts in there without making it sound like a list. It's not supposed to sound like a list.

Tutor: Let me read it quickly and see what you have.

Now the tutor knows what to evaluate in the paper. Only after having a student explain the assignment and his own problems with that assignment should a tutor begin to read.

### *Read*

Reading ought to be a simple stage, but it is not. On their part, students are understandably apprehensive at the prospect of having some stranger (albeit a friendly stranger) read their work. Even in the most ideal circumstances, a tutor is still an evaluator of sorts, and evaluation is always a touchy business. The tutor must evaluate right in front of the student; there is no anonymity, no protection. Tutors, for their part, are also apprehensive about this stage of the session. They know that they must read quickly but carefully while the student waits, watches, and sometimes interrupts to explain what may not have even been read yet.

To alleviate some of the tension on both sides, tutors usually begin by explaining that they will read the entire essay before beginning a discussion. They tell the student that they will probably check places they want to talk about, but those checks serve only as reminders to them to go back to that section of the paper, nothing more. Then they read quickly, trying to keep in mind what the student has told them about the assignment and about his or her writing problems.

Tutors are looking here for a way to begin. They cannot hope to teach to every error; they know that that kind of instruction simply overloads a student anyway. Instead, they look for the major strengths and weaknesses of the paper. They can begin with the assumption that

the student has tried to make sense of the assignment. They look for that sense and seek to work with it.

On this particular paper, for example, the student knew that he had to discuss the seventies in general but limit his discussion to something particular about the seventies, and use research to support a thesis. He understood that, while he had done the research and had limited the topic, he was still unable to state his thesis and that the paper read like one long, disjointed list. With that information in mind the tutor reads looking for patterns in the essay and perhaps even a hidden thesis.

### *Praise*

Tutors must remember what researchers like Paul Diedrich have taught us—praise is an essential step in the evaluating process. It is especially essential in a one-on-one situation. If the evaluation is to mean anything at all to the student, it must demonstrate that the tutor can see what the student has done well. This praise can be directed at any part of the paper—the topic, the language, the title, even a specific sentence or description. It does not matter what it is. What does matter is that both the student and the evaluator recognize that this student has succeeded at some level.

The tutor working with the example paper would probably mention those same strengths that were pinpointed by faculty in the writing-across-the-curriculum workshop. The essay is strong on research. The student does have specific facts, though at least one reader noted that not all of his facts were accurate. Further, the student has carefully documented the essay. The tutor might also mention that, while the student has not stated his thesis yet, the essay does have a potential thesis in the very last idea presented—that the independent inventor may be getting regulated out of existence.

### *Question*

With the information gathered in talking and reading, tutors go back over the paper asking questions about specific choices the student made. It is important for any tutor to know, for example, whether or not the student can rephrase passages to clear up confusion. For the "Innovations" essay, the tutor might ask the student to explain what he means by the seemingly out-of-place statement, "The mid-seventies were concentrated more on anti-pollution devices and safety." Does the information that follows support the statement? Can he think of ways to make it clear that the next two paragraphs are connected to the statement? What does he know about paraphrasing and making transi-

tions? Can he rephrase the statement itself so that it does not sound so confusing? The *idea* in the statement is not a bad one. The tutor's job is to help the student see how it can be presented effectively. Tutors ask questions about word choices, examples, broad statements. They do not allow the student to respond with vague answers. Instead, they keep pursuing the issue. If they want another example, they ask for it.

Some useful questions about the example essay could be focused on the quotation concerned with "Yankee ingenuity." It is an interesting comment that simply stands alone. The student has failed to develop it or to connect it to anything else in the essay. The tutor might ask the student why he used it, what it meant to him, and perhaps even suggest that something like "Yankee ingenuity" might also be a quality of the eighties. With these questions, the tutor tries to get the student to see what might be unique about the decade he is covering. Once that is achieved, the student may be able to find his thesis somewhere in the last two paragraphs of the essay.

The questioning and on-the-spot performance are important throughout the evaluation. Tutors must know whether the student really understands the topic, whether the student could do more with it if asked, or whether the student is as confused as the language in the paper suggests. That knowledge matters when a final decision on instruction is made.

### *Decide on Instruction*

All of the talking, reading, and questioning should lead to the final evaluation. In this case, the evaluation has nothing to do with a grade. It has everything to do with a method of instruction.

Many students and instructors mistakenly assume that a student referred to a writing lab will get but one kind of instruction—drilling in basic grammar, punctuation, and spelling. As many of the workshop participants admitted, quite often instructors outside English mark only mechanics, for those are the errors they can most easily pinpoint. Since students may have problems that go far beyond mechanics, tutors must decide when to teach to basic mechanical problems and when to ignore them.

For example, tutors may ignore problems with mechanics when it is clear that the student is having serious problems developing, organizing, or explaining his topic clearly; this is the case with our example paper. In the short space of a tutoring session, time spent on spelling and punctuation is wasted on a student who only vaguely understands the topic he is trying to work with. Most tutors will ignore proof-reading problems until they are convinced that the student has some-

thing to say and has said it as completely and clearly as possible.

The student who comes in with a well-developed, interesting essay that has a myriad of errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation will benefit from a lesson on the basics. But even then, the tutor can only focus on major errors or patterns of errors (as Mina Shaughnessy has demonstrated in *Errors and Expectations*). We cannot hope to teach this student in one hour everything not learned in twelve years or more of schooling.

Sessions must focus on discovering general problems, encouraging the students to make the changes themselves, and giving a few rules or suggestions for revision. The students should never simply sit and listen. They should rewrite during the session and try new ways of saying what they want to say right then, not later.

### **Making the Lab Work**

Any tutoring session will be more successful if the tutor and the student both have a clear idea of the assignment and the teacher's expectations. This is where teachers in other disciplines can help. As the exercise at our writing-across-the-curriculum workshop demonstrated, teachers are generally interested in working toward the same ends in improving student writing. We agree on the basics; given this, we must learn to work more closely together in helping our students.

Teachers from every discipline can and should refer students with writing problems to the lab. A teacher may wish to make this referral voluntary or it may be a requirement for course completion. When teachers refer students to the writing lab, they can help immensely by following a procedure similar to the exercise described. Students are generally referred to the lab on the basis of a piece of writing. If a student would bring that paper with the teacher's list of acceptable and unacceptable areas, tutor and student would have an immediate focus in their work. They could zero in on the problem areas identified by the referring teacher. Without such help, both tutor and student are forced to make a judgment on what is expected by the teacher. This is time-consuming and inefficient. After all, it is the referring teacher who must, in the last analysis, be satisfied with the paper. The more information the tutor and student have to work with, the more productive their session will be.

When a student is turning in a completed writing assignment, the teacher should be told that the student has worked with a tutor and be given a brief run-down of the process they followed. Teachers who know their students are working in the writing lab may take this into

consideration, extending the due date where necessary or allowing the students to rewrite an unsatisfactory paper. Once a paper has been graded, the teacher may wish to write a note to the tutor giving impressions or suggestions for further work. Students should bring graded papers into the lab to share their results with their tutors.

As in any good working relationship, communication between tutor and teacher should not be one-way. Tutors must, in return, report back to referring teachers, explaining the work they have done with a student and assessing that student's progress. This should be an ongoing process. For as many weeks as a student meets with a tutor, there should be an active three-way communication among student, tutor, and referring teacher. At the end of a student's work in the lab, the tutor should send an evaluation of that student's work to the teacher.

There are several other ways that referring teachers or departments can help the work of the writing lab. Most basically, they can talk with their classes about the lab, simply giving information on where it is, how to make an appointment, and what services are available. More specifically, teachers can explain how the tutoring process could benefit students with specific assigned writing tasks. They can send copies of their paper assignments with students. (Students are often surprisingly inaccurate in their understanding of assignments.) More generally, a writing lab, in order to serve the school as a whole, should have examples of good papers and lab reports from a variety of departments. There should be style sheets and formats for documentation available to students from all disciplines. Teachers could greatly assist their students by making tape-recordings for use in the lab with sample papers, describing why and how the papers are successful.

Finally, and perhaps most important, teachers from across the curriculum can and should share their ideas and suggestions for the lab. A successful writing lab serves the whole school; in order to do this it must solicit suggestions from faculty and administration in all departments. These people know the needs of their own students. They should be encouraged to share these needs, as well as their problems and concerns, with tutors and administrators in the lab. Meetings, workshops, coffee hours, or lab open-houses are all possible forms for this kind of give and take.

With this kind of cooperation across the curriculum, with student-tutor-teacher unity of purpose, a writing lab can make significant progress in meeting the needs of students. The tutor/student relationship offers the ideal one-on-one learning situation, and the lab as a whole offers students and faculty from all disciplines a common ground for dealing with one of our students' most basic education needs.

**Note**

1. For further information, see the following sources: Ken Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models," *College English* 34 (February 1973): 634-643; Peter Elbow, *Writing without Teachers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); Thom Hawkins, *Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing* (Urbana, Ill.: ERIC/NCTE, 1976); Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, "The Inquiry Method," in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Delta, 1969), pp. 25-38; Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).