

The WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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Information Exchange Agreement

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A member of our newsletter group called recently to ask if he could include some of the newsletter's "Tutor's Corner" columns in the manual for his tutors. As he explained, his tutors value--and learn from--the advice of their peers. When he asked his tutors to think about why they find those articles by other peer tutors so useful, one tutor responded that the authors have credibility because "they've been there." The group of tutors agreed that indeed being experienced, "having been there," does earn their respect and attention. The director then asked his tutors how they expected to establish credibility with their own students. After the director asked this question, he described the room as being engulfed in a silence that seemed as if it might last for the rest of the hour--until one tutor finally said, "I suppose that's why you ask us to keep writing as part of this training course."

And if you encourage your tutors to write about their tutoring, encourage them also to share that writing with the rest of us as a "Tutor's Corner" column. Send those essays along with your own articles, reviews, announcements, questions, comments, suggestions, names of new members, and your yearly \$7.50 donation, \$12.50 for Canadian friends, (in checks made payable to Purdue University) to me:

Muriel Harris, editor
Writing Lab Newsletter
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West Lafayette, IN 47907

Here is a candidate for the Most Mystified Comment of the Month, from a student whose cleverly written paper was abundantly annotated with CS in the margins:

"She wants me to put in a circumflex somewhere, I guess, but I don't know where to put it."

Mary King
University of Akron

INVASION OF THE GREMLINS

They're everywhere. And nowhere. We can't get rid of them, no matter how hard we try. Not even Edwin Newman knows the peace of a life without "grammar gremlins," those not-so-imaginary, impish creatures that sabotage our prose. The trick is to get them before they get us.

That's exactly what we're trying to do with our "Grammar Gremlins" handouts, which we provide to teachers who in turn distribute them to their classes. We hope that completing the self-test will encourage students to visit the Writing Center for some follow-up materials on any gremlin that was a "gotcha."

The "Grammar Gremlins" handouts are also a way of providing a tangible service to students while sparing them the "indignity" of visiting the Writing Center. Maybe once they begin to perceive their writing skills in a realistic way and know that good-humored, competent instruction is available, they will realize that learning and self-improvement are always dignified.

While our "Grammar Gremlins" deal only with the surface features of writing, at least they allow us to make contact. Once we help students over their reluctance to come in, only then do we have a fighting chance to get them to stay and talk about the important stuff.

Below is one of our nastier gremlins. Go ahead, try him out. But beware: gremlins like to sharpen their claws on first timers like you.

GRAMMAR GREMLIN 5

Commakaze: The Divine Mark

We know the extremes: the punctuation addicts whose prose seems--like Victorian architecture or modern-day calligraphy--too fancy for its function, more arty than art-

ful. Its appearance: wallpaper, squirming with ink. These writers move us gently, yet always deliberately, from part to part, seeming all the while perhaps a bit . . . distraught.

And then there are the notorious under-punctuators like Gertrude Stein or William Faulkner whose prose often must be read all in one breath because there simply are no marks to help readers who must dig deeper and deeper not even knowing where they're going and maybe not even caring as they construct in their own minds what it all really means.

Those of us who ride comfortably in the middle, carefully observing when punctuation fad has become punctuation rule, we know where home is: the comma. Not the breathless dash, not the colon with its wall of periods holding back a flood of words, not the semicolon lying like a dead fish between our words, its dark eye unseeing. Just the comma, please. If those other three marks turned up missing one morning, we could still make do with the germinal, sperminal comma and the eight basic rules for its use.

The following sentences each need a single comma. As you decide where the comma goes in each, try to recall which of the eight rules justifies its use. The rules are given with the answers after the sentences.

1. By late afternoon there was a shy breeze that moved through the willow's drooping branches like a stranger's hand across a beaded curtain.
2. Loomed in the same style and texture as 100 years ago these woven cloths recall a time of solidity and care now faded as a pair of designer jeans.
3. Since men as well as women often link their self-esteem with what they wear it is not surprising that compulsive shoppers come in both sexes.
4. Vegetarians have lower blood pressure than nonvegetarians and it is postulated that the higher fiber content of vegetarian diets contributes materially to the difference.
5. The incriminating evidence was provided not by a jealous coworker or vindictive boss or the spurned lover or any of those who

wanted to see Richard die, but by Richard's own arrogant carelessness.

6. AT&T recently patented a new wide-band high-speed packet switch that can interweave voice, data, and video on a single channel.

7. She picked up her child and held him, face to face; it amazed Dianne that she, like the other women in her life, was a mother now too.

8. Another noticeable change in the tournament concerns the caliber of play which has improved every year and has achieved a greater level of consistency.

Answers to "Commakaze":

1. Comma follows "afternoon." "By late afternoon," an adverb phrase, functions here as a sentence modifier ("absolute" for you old-school types). Sentence modifiers should be set off with commas, although some writers prefer to speed up their prose by not having the comma after short prepositional phrases of time and place (such as "By late afternoon"!).
2. Comma after "ago." Introductory participial phrases, present or past tense variety, are set off with commas. Period.
3. Comma after "wear." Opening dependent clauses must be separated from their main clauses with commas.
4. Comma after "nonvegetarians." Compound sentences, unless they're short and/or closely related, must separate their clauses with a comma when followed by a coordinate conjunction. Changes in the group of coordinate conjunctions: "as" is mostly out of fashion, and "plus" is cropping up here and there, but mostly there.
5. Comma after "provided." Interrupting negative alternatives are set off by commas. This sentence already contains the second comma in the pair, the one after "die."
6. Comma after "wide-band." Both "wide-band" and "high-speed" are coordinate modifiers of the noun. Coordinate modifiers and coordinate items in a list always take commas unless joined by "and." The other two adjectives, "new" and "packet," also modify the noun but each in a different way than the coordinate adjectives. It's interesting that native speakers can deter-

mine from the structure and rhythm of the sentence that "packet switch" is a two-word noun (like "nuclear reactor") without ever having heard the term "packet switch" before. Omitting the comma after "data" is a widespread practice now. But purists insist (mostly to themselves) that the comma should be included unless the last two items are a single unit. Probate judges can be purists. One judge interpreted a will that read "and I leave \$10,000 to be apportioned to my children John, Mary and Robert" to mean that John should receive \$5,000. Mary and Robert had to split the other \$5,000. True story.

7. Comma after "now." When "too" is used as a synonym for "also," it receives a comma.

8. Comma after "play." What follows "play" is a nonrestrictive clause, which always takes a comma (as do other parenthetical elements if they are not trapped inside parentheses).

Score

- 8: excellent
- 6-7: good
- 4-5: average
- 0-3: instructional handouts available in the Writing Center

A Parting Shot

After listing some rules for writing in his essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell advises readers to "Break any of these rules before writing something abominable." That's good advice for any writer.

David Taylor
Moravian College
Bethlehem, PA 18018

BEGINNING AND MAINTAINING A PEER-TUTOR BASED WRITING CENTER IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

After attending a workshop on peer-tutor based writing centers at an NCTE Convention, I determined that our students could benefit from the same type of program. I quickly discovered that "same type" led to incredible variances because of the unique nature of each school environment. I also discovered early on that writing center

founders and directors must adapt and adapt and adapt to such concerns as facilities available, cost of the program, administrative hidden and exposed agendas, colleague pressures, state requirements for credit, liability coverage and supervision, and scheduling of students to the center.

And I am still adapting. But the conceptual purpose of the program has not changed: to train students to serve as tutors of writing for their peers and to maintain a writing center that is open every period of every day of the week. In our high school population of 645 students in grades 9-12 and an adjacent middle school population of 200 students in grades 7-8, the tutors have conducted over 700 sessions since school began this year, and they have tutored over 400 different students in grades 7-12.

We consider our program in only its second year to be a success. As I still must maintain to administrators, we do not propose that we can raise ACT, PSAT, or SAT scores and we do not guarantee our clients "A" compositions; we do propose that the process of writing in our schools has received intensive and comprehensive attention, that our students are excited and involved in writing, that we have created an atmosphere in which students feel encouraged and comfortable about their writing, and that teachers have noticed that students now care about their writing. We conclude that the center has caused this focus on writing and that our students' writing skills improve as a result of the focus.

The first hurdle that faced me two years ago was the problem of explaining to administrators what a peer-tutor based writing center was and how it could function in our school environment. The program that evolved involved compromise on both our parts; they had to understand the concept and how it could be implemented, and I had to rethink the scheduling of the training sessions. I did not know it at the time, but state requirements had, as of that year, expanded to include an intervention program mandated for all students having difficulty in any of the academic disciplines.

The proposal for a writing center satisfied state requirements for that intervention program. After behind scenes discussions and negotiations, I finally arrived at an agenda for the first meeting with administrators for formal consideration

of the program. That agenda included the proposed time schedule for the summer sessions in which the students would be trained; a proposal that met state requirements for course credit for the tutors (1/2 credit for one semester of tutoring plus the twenty-hour training session in the summer); the required reading syllabus for the tutors; the required writing syllabus for the tutors; a teacher supervision schedule for students in the writing center during the school day; a proposal that would handle the scheduling of the students to the center; a proposal for the facility which included a room next to mine no longer scheduled for classes because of our shrinking enrollment; the request for the placement of tables, chairs, filing cabinet; and a time analysis of the work I would do to prepare for the course to determine salary.

Each director will find a different set of hurdles because of particulars unique to each school system, but the above factors have to be considered regardless of the situation. In determining my role I based my salary proposal on the following considerations: development of course objectives (the tutors enroll in the course called Advanced Methods of Composition and it is considered by our guidance department to be an elective in the fine OR practical arts), development of pupil objectives, summer reading, xeroxing, room organization, school year reading selections, conducting two twenty-hour summer sessions with twenty students per session, responding to journals, keeping records of tutors and sessions, preparing monthly reports for administration, board, students, and teachers. I continue to teach my regularly assigned five English classes per day and direct the center as a supplemental contract agreement.

Elizabeth Ackley
Fairfield, Ohio

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

New England Writing Centers Association

NEWCA invites proposals for workshops/presentations for its annual Spring Conference, this year to be held in conjunction with the Second Merrimack College Conference on Composition Instruction at Merrimack College, North Andover, Massachusetts. The conference will be held on March 15 & 16, 1988,

with all workshops/presentations scheduled for the 16th. Proposals relevant to the concept of writing centers as integral components in the collaborative learning process are encouraged. Possible topics include evolution of writing centers, peer and professional tutors, ethical issues in tutorial relationships, management of writing centers, connections between the writing center and the institution at large, and computers in the writing center.

Papers describing workshops/presentations will be considered for publication in the Conference Proceedings. (Registration includes a copy of the Proceedings.)

Deadline: January 20, 1988 (notification of decision by early March)

Send 1-2 page proposals indicating method of presentation, anticipated audience, and equipment and length of time (1-hour/2-hour) required, to:

Kathleen Shine Cain
English Department
Merrimack College
North Andover, Massachusetts 01845
(617)683-7111 ext.269

CALL FOR PAPERS

Southeastern Writing Center Association

March 3-6, 1988

"The Composing/Computer Connection"

Omni Hotel
Charleston, SC

We encourage presentations, workshops, and discussions on the conference theme. Send proposals by January 1, 1988. However, we will consider any subject that has to do with writing centers and effective writing: peer and/or professional tutoring techniques, word processing, funding, and visibility. High school teachers interested in starting writing centers and peer tutors interested in rapping about effective writing are also encouraged to attend.

Contact Angela W. Williams, The Writing Center, The Citadel, Charleston, SC 29409 (803) 792-3194; Tom Waldrep, English Department, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208 (803-777-2512).

COMPUTER SOFTWARE REVIEW

Reading Mastery, Series B. Regents/ALA Company, 2 Park Avenue, New York, NY, 10016. \$299.95.

One of the most-used computer programs in Purdue's Writing Lab is Regents' Grammar Mastery. ESL students, in particular, are drawn to it, and it's not unusual to see two or three students clustered at the screen really enjoying an afternoon's combat with the infinitive-gerund choice. When Reading Mastery appeared, advertised as appropriate for "secondary language arts" students and for ESL, we were eager to try it out. Reading Mastery, Series B is a well-packaged, intermediate-level reading program. It is made up of six lesson diskettes and one management diskette. Each lesson contains a branching story with eight possible endings, plus a vocabulary module, a comprehension module tailored to the selected ending, and cloze exercises with intervals varying from two to fifteen words or with articles eliminated. Everything can be printed, making homework assignments possible.

While this program has some good features, notably the cloze tests and the vocabulary module, from an ESL and basic writing perspective it suffers from the same problem as much of the material in these fields; it assumes that intermediate language skills means immature language users. This is simply not always the case. In fact, there is a large population of ESL and basic students in American universities who are very much in need of intermediate work in writing and reading but who are anything but immature. Typically they are students of science or technology with good minds, and in the case of non-native students, some with advanced degrees in their fields. Reading Mastery is not the program for them.

The program advertises itself as appropriate for reading levels of 4.5 to 6.9, for remedial reading, and for basic English skills. It works in all Apple II-type computers, and is easy to use. I found the instructions to be generally clear, and the few glitches may have resulted as much from my ignorance of computers as from flaws in the program. It was not always obvious to me that I needed to press a certain key to go on, or that I could not move to another story when I wished. I found the comprehension questions, the cloze exercises, and the vocabulary review to be thorough and well-

designed. These techniques reflect a healthy combination of traditional and new approaches to reading instruction. The comprehension questions are so familiar to most students that I imagine there must be a certain comfort in seeing them appear yet once again. The cloze exercises, on the other hand, are a well-tested method of developing a deeper understanding of the ways language and texts work, and I was happy to see them in this package. Reading Mastery offers cloze with a variable interval which enhances even more the benefits of this task. Since the work is self-directed, the student can increase or reduce the complexity of the work by changing the interval, and can move on at will. The vocabulary review also is quite well done; it contains definitions and clearly marked syllable stress. The pronunciation guides, however, would be inadequate for non-native speakers. The vocabulary is in context so that nuances of usage can be seen, and although the text is simplified (thereby limiting the students' possibilities of rapidly enlarging their range of applications of a word), the relationships within the text are clearly drawn.

The least attractive part of the program creates a fairly serious problem; the stories are dull. The pedagogical design is good; each of the six lesson diskettes has a different branching story. The reading pace can be set for either timed or untimed reading, which is a very good thing and demonstrates just the sort of capability that makes computers such valuable adjuncts. The branching feature, even though it is another example of computer virtuosity, falls flat, due to the predictability of the stories. Speaking from the point of view of the students we see at Purdue, the situations are over-simplified and obvious, and the choices offered in the branching feature are so trivial it is next to impossible to generate any interest in the outcome of one's selection. For instance, in a story about teenagers dealing with a "moral issue," we are asked if we want Denise to drive when she is drunk. Perversely, I tapped "yes," and got what I expected: she was caught by the police and her parents were very, very disappointed in her. Likewise in the mountain climbing and deepsea diving stories; we are given choices at various points in the story which are so structured and also so moralistic in tone that any adolescent I have known, to say nothing of any adult, no mat-

ter how weak his/her reading skills, would scope out in seconds what was going on and seconds later lose interest. I felt especially the lack of any hint at a rationale for these choices other than blatant common sense (as in the case of Denise); what motivates the captain of the submarine to decide to stay down and fight to the death or to race for the surface and run away?

There are cultural values buried in the array of options offered in the branching feature, and ESL students in particular would benefit greatly from some understanding of the motivation for the choices, but none is offered. What's more, the assumption that everyone shares these values unquestioningly is just plain wrong. Adding a hint of characterization would have helped us understand, but unfortunately the people in these stories are as flat as can be. I fear that the assumption of "cognitive immaturity" has been made yet again about basic readers; we imagine that, lacking other resources, these students spend their free time with Thundercats and Flintstone reruns, instead of poring over the New York Times Review of Literature, like we do. To say nothing of the biased condescension implied by these assumptions, the reality of the basic readers and ESL students I know is very different. The American students are generally whizzes at math or science, and the non-native speakers are not infrequently published writers in their own language, sometimes with multiple degrees. Denise indeed; Dr. Seuss is more interesting than these banal tales.

In spite of the merit in the cloze and vocabulary activities, the texts from which these lessons are derived are dull enough to put any but the cognitively immature, whoever they may be, to sleep, and I regret that. There is much good work in this program, and I feel sure that this classy package was not intended for such a limited audience.

Margaret Clark
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana

LITERACY CONFERENCE - SEPTEMBER 1988
The Right to Literacy, a conference sponsored by the MLA, Ohio State University, and the Federation of State Humanities Councils, will take place in Columbus, Ohio, on 16-18 September 1988. Members of the teaching

profession at all levels, as well as others interested in the literacy movement, are encouraged to attend or propose individual papers. There will be as many as one hundred concurrent sessions devoted to the following areas of concern: The Uses of Literacy; Literacy and Its Enemies, Illiteracy and Its Friends; Becoming Literate Today; and Struggles for Literacy Today. The deadline for submitting proposals is 15 January 1988. Anyone interested should request a proposal form from Robert D. Denham, MLA, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003.

ANNOUNCEMENT OF JOB VACANCY

DIRECTOR OF THE WRITING LAB
LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY
APPLETON, WI

The director administers the writing lab; works individually with students who need help with academic writing; recruits, trains and supervises peer tutors; conducts workshops; gives presentations on topics such as writing the essay exam, overcoming writing blocks, organizing the research paper; evaluates the degree of writing improvement shown by students who have been tutored.

Qualifications: M.A. or Ph.D., with training and experience in teaching writing. Evaluation of credentials will focus particularly on quality and extent of experience.

Nine month position; salary determined by qualifications and experience. Send application and vita with names of three references to Charles Lauter, Dean of Students, Lawrence University, Appleton, WI 54912 by January 8, 1988; position begins September, 1988.

Lawrence University is an equal opportunity employer.

CORRECTION

We wish to apologize for the omission of and error in the following information from the Table of Contents for the Proceedings of the WCA:EC meeting, May 1987:

Rose I. Bhakuni, Kenmore High School, Akron, Ohio "The Special Benefits of Personal Writing in a High School Writing Center" 241-246.

Mary King, University of Akron, "What Can Students Say About Poems? Reader Response in a College Writing Lab: 247-258.

The Tutor's Corner

THE SECOND LANGUAGE STUDENT

Inspiration seldom drops from the sky, and it almost never comes when needed most. On these chilly winter mornings in northern Ohio when the air is thinner than the flaky crust of mom's homemade apple pie, I wonder why I agreed to work at the University Writing Center. The weather whispers signs of incompetence and failure, but a steamy cup of coffee conquers the morning air, and I am on my way again. Through my experience as a tutor, I know the reason that I work at the writing center usually awaits me at my first appointment, but the answer has not always been so clear. In the beginning, every day I faced what seemed like insurmountable obstacles, especially with second-language students. Although I spoke other languages, I was alien to my students' backgrounds and cultures. Nevertheless, one second-language student, Garba, settled my doubts in this area and led me to different approaches in teaching writing.

Last semester, twice a week, I was greeted with the eager face of Garba, an international student from the Netherlands. When I first met Garba, I was slightly apprehensive about our sessions; he seemed distant and intimidated. Although he was a senior, Garba felt uncomfortable about his writing abilities. Therefore, I had to choose my path of instruction carefully.

The first session, an "acquaintance hour," was spent getting to know Garba. I was interested in how his culture was different in relation to writing skills. Garba told me that he had been taught English grammar and usage in his country. He was often adept at reciting rules, but he had no training in organizational or pre-writing skills. Due to this oversight, Garba had experienced many setbacks in writing. He often wrote sentences that were grammatically correct, but collectively created incoherent essays.

After a thorough discussion of his country, I related the writing experiences I had encountered throughout my education. Following this, we synthesized the two backgrounds which made it easier for Garba to understand the expectations of his instructors. Also, Garba seemed impressed with the fact that I was interested in his

culture; this enabled me to form a mutual line of communication (a necessary process in tutoring any second language student).

The second step was to motivate Garba, and simultaneously, produce a panacea for his fear of writing. The approach had to be creative and informative. As part of the solution, I created the "Seven Commandments of Writing," guidelines for Garba's attitude. These guidelines were important because I tried to stress that attitude was 99% of successful writing. The "commandments" were extremely useful both with Garba and other students. The following are my "Seven Commandments of Writing":

(1) Thou shalt not kill thy confidence with negative input such as "I'm just not the writer-type."

(2) Thou shalt not covet others' ideas. (Don't Plagiarize!)

(3) Thou shalt honor thy instructors, tutors, and others who care. (Remember that they are human and do make mistakes.)

(4) Thou shalt not lie or make excuses; admitting your writing weaknesses is the beginning of correcting them.

(5) Thou shalt remember thy priorities. (Hint: an essay that is due on Monday is more important than the party the night before.)

(6) Thou shalt not be lazy (although we sometimes have a tendency to be); writing is not necessarily a talent, but a skill which must be practiced to be acquired.

(7) Attitude is 99% of successful writing.

In Garba's case, the "commandments" gave him direction. He gained confidence in himself and his abilities as a writer. This approach also conveyed to Garba that I understood the problems he encountered as a student. Subsequently, Garba seemed less hesitant to request assistance when he realized that his instructor was concerned and willing to help in any manner possible.

My third goal was to steer Garba away from technical terms and mechanical errors until he clearly understood the importance of organization and coherence. My main purpose was to impress upon Garba that good writing clearly communicated the writer's message to the intended audience. My second purpose was to stress that language was a process. With these purposes in mind, I asked Garba to keep a daily journal or a "commonplace book" of his everyday activities. He was encouraged to complete a paragraph a day. In addition to this, I assigned him an article in his field of study to read for each session, and I asked him to watch the news when possible since it presented standard spoken English.

Each of these exercises led to improved writing. As a matter of fact, he not only improved, but he also received an A+ on his research paper. The final outcome was even more surprising; I learned as much from Garba as he learned from me.

So on these icy mornings when snow climbs my boots from Brazil and the wind skirts my frozen face, I know why I chose to work at the Writing Center. It requires little effort for me to realize that I find a certain satisfaction when I look into the appreciative eyes of a tutee.

Ramona C. Reeves
Peer Tutor
Bowling Green State Univ.
Bowling Green, Ohio

TUTOR-STUDENT CONFERENCES: THEORIES AND STRATEGIES

Research and theory often serve to validate what we as educators already know from experience. Those of us who train and supervise writing center tutors have a unique opportunity to see this in action. In this article I will review published material on the tutor-student conference, examine three conference styles along with tutor comments on them, and discuss benefits of the conference to both tutors and tutees.

According to Muriel Harris in Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference (1986),

Conferences, opportunities for highly productive dialogues between writers and

teacher-readers, are or should be an integral part of teaching writing. It is in the one-to-one setting of a conference that we can meet with writers and hear them talk about their writing. And they can also hear us talk, not about writing in the abstract, but about their writing (3).

The conference can be particularly helpful because basic writers are frequently unaware of the stages they go through and the decisions involved in producing a piece of writing (Luban, Matsushashi, and Reigstad 31).

We see the validity of research on conferences in our encounters with Writing Center students. Tutors at Eastern Washington University work with basic writers from each of our three freshman writing courses. The tutors hold conferences with the students one hour a week, and the students work an additional three hours a week individually. At the Center we teach our tutors to use the conference styles defined by Thomas Reigstad and Donald McAndrew and are frequently impressed by the tutors' insights into these methods.

Reigstad and McAndrew find effective conferences take on three patterns, depending on the student's particular needs: tutor-centered, collaborative, and student-centered. They find tutor-centered conferences are probably the most common. In such conferences the student rarely participates in conversation or offers responses. Instead the instructor or tutor gives specific direction for further writing. Collaborative conferences, on the other hand, allow the tutor a more flexible role. Here the tutor may determine the direction of the conference, but she also moves freely between the roles of instructor and conversant. Thus the instructor and the student share in the decision-making process. Student-centered conferences encourage the student to do most of the talking, thinking, and working (5). These three conference styles are illustrated below by transcripts of conferences between tutors and students in the EWU Writing Center.

The Tutor-Centered Conference

In tutor-centered conferences the tutor offers the student some specific advice,

such as the following example:

Tutor: This paper has got some possibilities. I think you should put your thesis statement in the last sentence of the first paragraph instead of at the end of the paper, for reader clarity.

Student: Yeah.

Tutor: Also add some specific examples in the body paragraph.

Student: Yeah.

Tutor: Bring the paper back if you have problems with it.

Student: OK.

The irony is that the conference would probably be more effective if the student were asking questions. However, the tutor-centered conference has some positive aspects. This style would be useful to direct the explanation when the student needs a point of grammar explained--for example, the comma splice--or when she needs advice on how to choose a good title. The tutor-centered conference can help the student who is seeking an expert. Sometimes the student wants some help but is so befuddled that he has no sense of the problems. In such a case the tutor will have to provide direction. This conference also allows tutors to practice the "teaching mode." In other words, the student tutors are modeling being teachers. According to one of my tutors, Jan, "I do have a couple of students whom I cannot work with on a conversant-to-conversant level as they both insist on putting me in an authority role. I continually try to lessen their anxiety towards me by reminding them we are learning together."

The disadvantages to this method are apparent. At its extreme the tutor could end up doing the writing for the student. Moreover, if the student sits passively and doesn't contribute to the conference, he is less likely to make significant revisions later in his drafts. The student who waits for the tutor to solve his problems does not learn to reflect on his writing and to ask the tutor meaningful questions.

On the whole, the tutor-centered conference is the least satisfactory type of interaction between tutors and tutees. As Greg Jacobs points out:

Both student and instructor have to know what is demanded of each other and have to be ready to let go of traditional classroom expectancies. That may not be easy to do because many instructors see themselves as transmitters of knowledge, and few instructors admit they don't have enough patience and confidence in their students to allow them to find out, often slowly and painstakingly, what they are trying to say and how to state it clearly and coherently. And students who see their role as one who follows directions, who seeks advice, and who responds to questions will have little, if any, input in the conference, and will fail to make important decisions regarding their own strengths and weaknesses (54).

The Collaborative Conference

The collaborative conference seeks to make the student more independent by helping him learn to ask and answer his own questions. Donald Murray in "The Listening Eye" describes his role as a teacher of writing: "Most times my students make tough--sometimes too tough evaluations--of their work. I have to curb their too critical eye and help them see what works and what might work so they know how to read evolving writing so it will evolve into writing worth reading" (15). Murray asks questions designed to place the responsibility of analyzing or evaluating the writing on the student (15). These collaborative questions are illustrated in the following tutor-student conference:

Tutor: What did you learn from this piece of writing?

Student: I learned about myself as a writer. I learned I do better on a draft if I just plunge in and don't first spend time on the introduction. I felt I got closer to what I really want to say.

Tutor: What do you intend to do in the next draft?

Student: Put in examples. Work on organization. I haven't worked on my conclusion yet.

Tutor: What surprised you in the draft?

Student: I started to write to the class, then to the caseworker and finally to Karl Jaspers. I felt an emotional response to the subject of the case.

Tutor: Where is the piece of writing taking you?

Student: I see myself making it more acceptable by polishing the writing and editing it.

Tutor: What do you like best in this piece of writing?

Student: I think I managed to make Cassi represent modern man's typical state of alienation.

Tutor: What questions do you have of me?

Student: Would I do better to just respond to the Jaspers' quotation or paraphrase it? Is my focus so narrow that I have left myself too little to write on? How long should the paper be anyway?

In this conferencing style the tutor reacts rather than acts. "Action in conferences is redefined as intelligent reaction," says Donald Graves. In Writing: Teachers and Students at Work (1983), Graves lists the following characteristics of teachers who act rather than react: They talk too much, they ignore the stage of the draft, they try to change the writer's topic, and they supply the right answers when the student is stuck. Teachers using Murray's method, on the other hand, become better listeners (127).

Tutors who use the collaborative style in their conferences value the shared experience they have with tutees as partners in learning. Audrey, a tutor in our Writing Center, says, "After we work out these questions, I point out possible changes in the student's work . . . I feel that shared responsibility for tutoring makes the

experience more beneficial for the student and the tutor." Many students in the Writing Center value the intimacy of a sustained relationship with a peer. The tutor, moreover, is modeling for the student behavior typical of good students, of students who study and get good grades. Jan says, "The most effective role to take is the role of conversant-conversant or peer-to-peer. When we discuss one of the problem areas in the student's area of skills, I try to relate my own struggle (if any) with that particular skill. For example, today one of the students was talking about his trouble with spelling. I related my own problem and then told him that I keep a dictionary next to the typewriter to aid me in this. I also told him I need to refer to the dictionary less and less through time."

One of the best ways for the tutor and tutee to share the conference process is to have the tutor read the student's paper aloud to her. When this is done the student can hear the unclear passages and discuss them with the tutor. In the process the tutor can offer nonjudgmental advice and encourage the student to talk. Positive oral comments made by the tutor tend to be more acceptable to the student than written feedback.

George Hillocks, in Research on Written Composition (1986), finds that extensive written comments do not improve student writing and that negative comments from the teacher only create negative attitudes toward writing in the student (160-68). Clearly, nonjudgmental feedback by tutors is useful to writers during the various stages of the drafting process.

The collaborative conference method has one major difficulty. It takes at least thirty minutes to work out Murray's six questions with a student. Perhaps it would be a good idea to keep a list of the six questions but limit each conference to a couple of them.

In Reigstad and McAndrew's third option, the student-centered conference, the student leads the discussion. For example:

Student: I am really interested in making my paper original. Do you think I have a new slant on the problem of drug abuse?

Tutor: Yes, I think your idea is worthwhile. Are you familiar with Gore Vidal's article on drug abuse?

Student: Yes, I've read it. Do you think I need to cite more sources than I have?

Here the student states his concerns, and the tutor responds to them. One disadvantage to this method is that the student may not know where his real problem areas are. Harris offers a technique known as "doing a quick and dirty" in order to get the writer to work on more important problems:

That is, if the highest priority on the student's agenda is "Does this paper have any comma splices?" the tutor may choose first to focus only on comma splices in hopes that the student, having cleared that concern from the list and having seen that he or she is in the company of someone who can really help, will be ready to move on to more important problems. (34)

One of the benefits of this method is that it focuses on the writer's concerns. If the student is concerned with originality or authentic voice, we need to deal with what the student writer values, what in her terms constitutes good writing.

Obviously if the student has prepared, if he comes in with questions and a sense of purpose, the tutor needs to deal with these concerns. John, a student in the Center, says, "What I would like to see happen at a tutor/student conference is this: The tutor works with the student positively, encouraging the student with the ideas that are brought in for discussion. Tutors need to realize that students have their own ideas and some very good ones at that."

However, we need not fear that students will refrain from telling us what their concerns are. Harris states that in a given conference students usually have one or two top-level concerns about their writing which they will bring up repeatedly. "Students may explain the major problem(s) they are having with a paper, ask questions about the assignment, point out places where the paper is weakest, express a desire for some evaluative comments from the instructor, request help in figuring out what to do next, or ask for information" (59). In this process the

student not only vocalizes concerns but, through the conversation, develops ideas that in effect serve as a prewriting for the next draft.

Students in the Writing Center repeatedly stress the need for tutors to listen to them during conferences. Says Jitske, quite emphatically, "The more the tutor talks, the less the student learns. Let the student talk."

There is no question that both the tutor and the student benefit from the conference format, whichever approach is used. People working together in helping relationships share not only the answers but the processes used to derive them. The tutor benefits, because as Comenius wrote over 300 years ago in the The Great Didactic, "He who teaches others teaches himself." The tutor teaches others, but he also teaches himself how to teach as well. He learns through both study and practice and knows he understands his subject when he can get his point across in a conference. The tutor makes cognitive gains by imitating conference styles taught to him in Writing Center training sessions. He learns to shift the focus from himself in order to elicit more responses from the student. This entails being able to assess the tutor's own questioning strategies and learning to allow time for the tutee's thoughtful response to questions. The tutor becomes skilled at focusing the student's thinking through his questions and at setting realistic goals with the student. Tutors practice active listening skills, including the ability to paraphrase, clarify, and expand. The tutor grows more adept at organizing materials, bringing in new information, and discriminating among ideas.

The tutor also develops new social skills. She grows in self-confidence as she works with someone less skilled than herself. She learns essential interpersonal skills such as giving statements of praise, encouragement, and affirmation. She learns how to give constructive criticism without being didactic and how to be assertive without being aggressive. These are skills which will carry over into other aspects of the tutor's life.

The tutor finds satisfaction in the helper relationship as she becomes increasingly confident in this role. The tutors at EWU are primarily secondary

education majors and graduate students who will teach in the two-year colleges. They grow as professionals in the tutorial role. Having spent many years in school as recipients of help rather than as givers, they find there are dividends to be gained from helping others. As working members of the college community, tutors are frequently surprised to learn how much they know about their field and how deeply their efforts are appreciated by students. No wonder tutors often report enhanced self-esteem as the result of their tutoring experience.

Tutors in the Writing Center develop a positive attitude toward learning and grow more caring about their own writing. "They become involved in a community of writers who are equally concerned about improving the quality of writing and becoming better writers" (Hawkins 448). Research on tutoring in ERIC during the last five years suggests that tutoring is even more beneficial for tutors than for tutees.

Tutees, on the other hand, profit from individual attention and increased communication opportunities. They gain in self-esteem by working with a tutor who understands their language and the problems they might be having with a teacher or a course. They receive specific help with writing problems without being penalized by grades. They work in partnership with peers who excel as good students.

The friendship and help involved in tutoring create a positive relationship which frequently leads the tutee to new academic achievements. As the student makes gains in her writing as the result of conferences, her attitudes frequently change. She finds she likes writing and looks forward to the conferences with her tutor instead of feeling that she is being punished by being required to attend the Writing Center. With the help of the tutor, the learner grows to better understand her writing processes and receives encouragement to continue working on her assignment. Having gained increased motivation, the tutee develops self-confidence and self-direction. She has a more positive self-concept and frequently does well in her writing courses as she begins to take her writing seriously.

Ultimately, students grow in their ability to ask and answer questions about their own writing. Our primary goal with students in the Writing Center is to promote

their growth as writers to the point where they no longer need tutors to give them feedback. In Toward a Theory of Instruction Jerome Bruner explains, "Instruction is a provisional state that has as its object to make the learner or problem-solver self-sufficient The tutor must correct the learner in a fashion that eventually makes it possible for the learner to take over the corrective function himself. Otherwise the result of instruction is to create a form of mastery that is contingent upon the perpetual presence of a teacher" (53). Students must learn that it is their responsibility to ask and answer their own questions.

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LEARNING AT THE LEARNING CENTER:
A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON NINE YEARS
"AT THE LAB"

Next fall will mark a major transition stage in my life. Beginning next year, for the first time in nine years, I will NOT be on the staff of a learning center. Although I will be happy to devote myself full-time to the English Department at Morningside College. I will very much miss the Learning Center because the exciting learning that happens at a learning center has been so important a part of my life for so long, both here at Morningside, where I have worked for three years, and at Augustana in Rock Island, where I worked for six years.

What have I learned at learning centers? I've learned that the hardest working students are not always the A students. Corrine, for example, a junior at Morningside, has spent two to three hours a week in the Center for three years now. She has worked with a number of us on the staff. When she arrived as a freshman, there was a large gap between the workings of her obviously quick mind and her totally incoherent prose. During that time, she has developed tremendously as a writer, due in large part to her determination and her confidence in her ability to learn. She is now able to pre-write, write, revise, and edit papers largely on her own. She has become a confident writer and a much improved writer, though A's are elusive as yet. She plans to become a secondary math teacher. At Augustana, I worked with students from the inner city Chicago public schools. As first-year students, many were virtually illiterate, despite graduating from high school with academic honors. The academic realities hit hard at first, but a large percentage of these bright, creative, motivated students, with Learning Center support, closed the gap between their high school deficiencies and the expectations of college, and even went on, eventually, to law school, dental school, medical school, and other forms of graduate education. Good learning centers, like ours, don't coddle students; they teach and they challenge in a supportive, non-threatening environment.

In the 3000 or so hours I've logged in learning centers, I've learned what students think about as they pre-write, draft, revise, and edit; how they read (and mis-read) assignments and teachers' comments on their papers; how they feel about writing; what strategies work (and don't work) in helping students through the writing process. The sheer volume of business at a Learning Center has taught me to be able to

read a five-page paper in five minutes and quickly focus on its strengths and weaknesses. I've learned quick, practical strategies for teaching students how to make something out of nothing, order out of chaos, clarity out of incoherence. I've learned ways students can help each other write better. I am a much better teacher of writing--in all my courses--because of my learning center experiences.

I have gained a wealth of information about the two creation stories in the Bible, anorexia, Dutch traditions, marriage customs in Ghana, the existence or non-existence of God, Jacksonian democracy, Ansel Adams' photography, sentimentality in poetry, blocking strategies in football or play direction, Elizabeth I's reign, Maslow's stages, how to analyze case studies in business, the major arguments for and against capital punishment, sweat lodges, the anatomy of an earthworm, and much, much more. A learning center is truly for the person who loves learning across the curriculum.

I have learned from students about themselves. Working in learning centers has allowed me to look into the lives of the people I have encountered. I recall reading the beautiful, eloquent, ungrammatical papers a Vietnamese student wrote about the fall of Saigon and his escape in a little boat. I recall a student from China explaining to me the effects of the cultural revolution on his family and his schooling. I also recall the freshman whose father hired a Chicago Tribune staff writer to write the son's religion paper on the apostle Paul. (The bluff--and the paper--failed.)

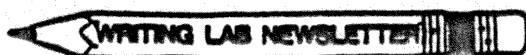
Learning center experience has also helped me understand and empathize much more with what students go through emotionally, socially, and academically in the course of a semester, a year, four years. Personal crises--deaths or divorce in the family, academic pressure from home, alcoholism or drugs, romance on the rocks, a criminal record, being the only Jewish woman among 2000 Lutherans and Catholics--may make academic success difficult, even impossible, for students, at least until the crisis can be resolved. The end of the semester is, of course, a crisis in everyone's life. Learning Center staff members, of necessity, become crisis counselors in an effort to make learning possible. Often the main therapy method is writing: "Write down how

you feel and then we'll talk." "Make a list of everything you have to do during finals week." In one case, I can recall a group writing project in the lab that helped solve a student's crisis. An older woman, a single mother, was distraught because a public day care center was about to lose its state funding, which would mean she would have to drop out of school. A group of lab students and staff--as a writing exercise--wrote and mailed letters to the state legislature. The funding came through, and the student stayed in school. Many, many days I have learned more from the students than they have from me.

What I have learned about learning centers themselves, having worked in two successful centers and visited a number of others, is that they must be staffed with bright, flexible, patient, academically experienced people with a sense of humor and a capacity for motivating and teaching students. Centers that have turned entirely to computer-assisted instruction, pre-planned learning packets, and the like--in lieu of tutor-tutee communication--fail. The success of learning centers like ours is a testimonial to the fact that students want to learn and will learn, given encourage-

ment, guidance, and challenges, confronted with people who care about them, who understand themselves the joy of learning, and who are not afraid to demand high quality thinking and writing. Learning centers do evolve, as our own history at Morningside illustrates, and they must change with the times. In the next decade, the learning center will be challenged to support the writing across the curriculum program, to help students incorporate computers into their composing processes, and perhaps to work with foreign students from new locales. Our lab, under new leadership, will continue to be successful as it grows and changes, as long as the college continues to recognize that the Learning Center is the best bargain on campus. The relatively small amount paid for staff and tutor salaries pays big dividends in terms of student learning and retention. As long as the Learning Center receives adequate funding to hire well-trained staff and sufficient staff to meet student and faculty needs, it will continue to be a place where learning happens.

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