THE WRITING LAB

...FROM THE EDITOR...

We're always glad to hear that you think the newsletter is a useful publication, and we appreciate your support. But some members of this group are overly generous in sending in additional checks long before your subscriptions run out. Mary Jo Turley, our newsletter assistant, conscientiously adds those additional checks into her computer files and changes the expiration date appropriately. Thus, some of you now have subscriptions that run into 1999 and beyond. Since we haven't solved the impending crisis of how to cope with computer programs that will experience meltdown when the year 2000 approaches, we'd appreciate your checking the expiration date on your mailing label.

For those of you whose subscriptions are about to expire, we'd appreciate your checking that label too and prodding your business offices to get the check to us. Particularly for long-time subscribers, Mary Jo tries to coax the computer not to drop you immediately, but she'd greatly appreciate checks sent to her in a timely manner.

Information on how to reach us can be found in the box on page 2. . . . The commercial's over now, so settle back and enjoy this month's issue.

Muriel Harris, editor

We can be our own audience: Using our records to educate ourselves

I'd like to share with you why I believe we should consider ourselves as the primary audience for the session reports we so diligently generate. As in many writing centers, much of our record-keeping is done to satisfy others, particularly university administrators who want statistics to justify funding. And of course faculty often want to know what is happening in our writing centers either to work with us or to criticize us. Yet, sometimes we need to remind ourselves about how our records can be used to educate ourselves.

My thinking about this issue has evolved over the past two and a half years that I have been the assistant director of the City College Writing Center, most notably influenced by what the tutors write on their session reports, and by what they told me when the issue of copying and sending these reports to instructors was discussed, or more accurately, hotly debated. Beyond recording what happens during a session to "cover ourselves," some of the tutors at the writing center began to

view the reports as a communication space where they could write about their work with a student writer. For them, it became a natural—and safe—place to record and reflect on what they were doing and why. Indeed, for these tutors, it is no longer a practice done to account for their activities, but a vehicle for helping them to develop their tutoring abilities.

Here is what Rokan recorded on his session report about a particu-

larly difficult and frustrating meeting with a student:

Our session was slightly problematic and slow at first. Two things obstructed our cooperation from the beginning (I understand it now). First of all, she probably wanted my direct opinions, not my suggestions, or asking about *her* opinions. Second, the subject was not familiar to me.

After just talking for 20-25 minutes, when both of us had become rather irritated because of the lack of progress, the two factors above started to diminish. I gained some knowledge of the subject, and she started to realize that she had to be more active herself.

We took an extra half hour beyond our allotted time, but the session ended fruitfully with a lot of work being done on the paper. Most of the work had to be done on developing the undeveloped points. (Many of those undeveloped points hindered my understanding in the first place.)

Would Rokan have written the session report in this way if it was only for the instructor? Possibly, but I don't believe so. I think Rokan was writing this report to make sense of the session and to understand why it didn't work initially, and why it eventually did become productive. He was reflecting on his actions and responses—in other words, he was using the session report to educate himself about what he was doing and why.

In our tutor education course, which I teach and the tutors can receive credit for, we spend time discussing these reports: how to do them and what their purpose is. I encourage tutors to summarize the session in a way that another tutor would have an idea of what happened during the previous meeting. In other words, I emphasize to the tutors that they provide an overview in-

dicating what the writer and tutor focused on during their time together. I also urge the tutors to include any other information about the writer that the tutor feels might be helpful to record for future reference. Then, the next time the writer comes to the center, the tutor, either the same one or another, can use the session report to see what has been discussed, perhaps review certain areas, and even encourage the writer to reflect on what he or she has done since the last session. In this way, tutors can help writers see the process of revision in action. I also see it as another way of encouraging students to take responsibility for their writing and their learning.

A tutor once told me that she views the session report as a way of "continuing the conversation" about writing that she has had with a student writer. Ideally, the session reports can help us begin to build a profile of the developing writer and his or her progress over time. In addition, the information can also offer us a way to help the student writer become more aware of his or her particular writing processes, and perhaps help that student writer see his or her development as a writer.

But more importantly, the session reports can also become a place for a tutor to witness his or her own growth as a tutor. As tutors reflect on their practices in writing these reports, they develop a deeper understanding of the various processes of writers. They can test their intuition and speculate on ways to facilitate a writer's development. And often, they begin to understand their tutoring role in conferencing—and how it sometimes shifts or blurs with other roles they may need to assume to help a student improve as a writer.

Here is Michelle writing about her meeting with Ora, acknowledging that this writer needed something other than assistance with the psychology paper she had brought with her:

This was both a fun and interesting

session. This woman left school when she was twelve. After 35 years she has re-entered school and is AFRAID to write, feeling very "old" and lacking much confidence. She doesn't think she can write, but with the introduction she wrote, I can say she has great potential to be a good writer. I honestly believe that what she really needs is confidence which I tried to give her.

I think this session report not only reflects how well-developed and sensitive Michelle's tutoring instincts are, but she is also reporting on her success as a way of reminding herself about her own competence as a tutor. Michelle demonstrates that she has really come to understand that helping someone with their writing is more than looking over the words on the page.

New tutors can also use the session report as a way of interrogating their own actions, particularly when they are trying to follow the advice they have been provided through the course, their readings, and conversations with experienced tutors. Here's Ashford trying to explain what happened in a meeting with a writer named Lee.

> Session ended prematurely because student refused to continue. She has apparently expected a proofreader/editor for her paper and therefore refused to give an explanation of the extremely unclear and disorganized material that she had written. Even though I repeated the question of "what are you trying to say here?" and waited patiently for her to respond, she just stared at the paper for a long while, then repeated what she had written. After I explained to her that she needed to explain in her own words her intended meaning in order to make connections, she refused to continue since I could not get a clear meaning.

Ashford's frustration with Lee is evident, and she probably was also not happy with the session. Yet, Ashford needed to report that frustration to try and understand why his questioning didn't elicit the desired responses. As a new tutor, he has to have time to experiment with the techniques he has learned—and learn how to deal with the resistance he might meet from some writers. By recording his experience, Ashford can begin to reflect on what he might do differently next time to make the session more productive.

I mentioned earlier that my thinking about the use of the session reports has evolved as a result of discussions with the tutors, particularly over the issue of copying and sending these reports to instructors. We do not send these or any other reports to instructors, but we do keep a file on each student writer who visits us. Since I haven't had an instructor who demanded to see a student's file, we haven't really developed a policy on this issue. But the issue the tutors were very adamant about was whether these session reports should be routinely copied and sent to instructors.

Many of the tutors were quite candid in expressing their discomfort with the idea of the instructor as the main audience. One tutor felt very strongly that writing the session report specifically for an instructor damaged the tutor-student relationship. For her, it would mean changing the role of the peer tutor to that of an informant since she is very protective of her role of being there to help the student. While some thought it might help to create a dialogue with instructors, others worried that the tutor's role might be seen as too aligned with the instructor's position. But the argument that eventually persuaded me was that the tutors said they wanted the session report as a place where they could write about their work with a student writer and question it (even address questions to me or the director) in safety. They wanted to maintain that "communica-

tion space" where they could record and reflect on what they were doing.

Using the session reports as a communication space appeals to me, especially since I want the tutors to see the session reports as a vehicle for helping them to develop their tutoring abilities. To help accomplish this goal, during the tutor education class, I require the new tutors to copy three to five of these reports and write a paper about their tutoring sessions. I ask them to consider two major questions when they look over their session reports: What worked well in a session or a series of sessions with a particular student? Or in several sessions with different students? and What will you do differently next time? My objectives for this assignment are both to push the tutor to see the importance of summarizing what happened in a session with a student writer, and to help the tutor begin to reflect on his or her own development and effectiveness as a tutor. More importantly, I view the assignment as a way to push tutors into thinking about what might be important to record about a session. In other words, I want them to see how writing the session report can help them become a better tutor.

One tutor, Claudia, responded to this assignment about the session reports by writing about how much is not said on these reports, often forcing the next tutor to sometimes "read between the lines and silences" to get a more complete picture of what happened during the session. She pointed out, very accurately, that what is written on these reports only reflects a small part of the session. However, when Claudia reviewed the reports from several of her sessions, she said she gained "a better sense of what really happened in the mutual process of understanding writing." She goes on to note:

> By reviewing the reports, I realized what things I should have done differently and what were the things that made some sessions

Assessing tutorials from the inside: Interactive exams

Wearing jeans and a casual shirt, I carried my backpack into the writing center. A tutor welcomed me, shook my hand, and asked me to sit down. I wasn't sure what to do next, so I waited for the tutor to guide me. The tutor (Sheila, I think) asked me what I wanted to work on. I told her I had to write a 3-5 page essay about my favorite sport. I hadn't started yet because I wasn't sure what the teacher wanted. Sheila asked me all sorts of questions about my topic, and by the time I left, I had two pages of notes about biking. I promised to bring my first draft to her next week.

After leaving the writing center, I walked across the hall to another room. I put the backpack on the floor and wrote down all the insights I had gained during the tutorial. Sheila was very friendly and knowledgeable, and most of her questions helped me extract details about my memories of biking, but a few times Sheila strongly recommended directions for the essay which I (acting as the student) disliked but was too polite to mention. As I was writing down the last of these insights, Sheila entered the room and handed me the tutorial summary sheet which would have been sent to my instructor (had I been a real student). Sheila and I spent the next twenty minutes discussing her impressions of the tutorial, my reactions as the student, my observations as the evaluator, and her summary of the tutorial.

The previous paragraphs describe an example of the final (interactive) exam I use for our "Practicum in the Tutoring of Writing" course, a three-credit training course for our peer writing tutors. What I have learned during interactive exams is both surprising and useful for helping tutors understand the emotional and educational effects they

have on students. Interactive exams have proven to be an effective and affective means of evaluating tutors' skills.

Definitions and Rationale

An interactive exam is a method of observing and assessing a tutor's skills from inside the tutorial. To perform this assessment, the writing center director (or a senior tutor) plays the role of *interactor* (inter + actor)[1] dressing, acting, and reacting as a student in a tutorial. Immediately after the exam, the tutor and interactor discuss what they each perceived during the mock tutorial.

I began using this role-playing exam because I felt that observing a tutorial from (at least) five feet away was too great a distance to understand the two most important aspects of a tutorial: the development of the student's writing abilities and the affective relationship between student and tutor. From a distance of five feet the observer cannot see the student's paper; therefore, it is impossible to know whether the tutor is effectively analyzing the student's writing. Also, when observing from a distance, the observer cannot tap into the mental and emotional processes of the student. How comfortable is the student "in opening . . . up to understanding or misunderstanding, judgment or acceptance, approval or disapproval"(Murphy 45)? A student's body language can be misleading. Is the student understanding and agreeing with the tutor's advice? Only the student knows. Therefore, in order to gain the student's perspective and to better understand the tutors' techniques, I had to become a tutee.

Role-playing has long been valued in the training of writing tutors, so using this technique to evaluate tutor trainees' performance fits well within writ-

ing center pedagogy and within trainees' expectations. Our tutor training class often held mock tutorials which involved peer tutors role-playing in "triads" (see Garrett 96-98): one tutor acted as the student, one as the tutor, and one as the "observer-commentator." After a mock tutorial, each triad member would share his or her insights about what happened during the tutorial. Interactive exams use a "dyad" instead of triad, collapsing the roles of student and observer-commentator into one: the interactor. Thus the "multitude of viewpoints from *inside* and *outside*" (Garrett 98) the tutorial are captured by one person who is experienced in tutorial assessment. Trainees are tutors, relatively comfortable roles for them after many mock tutorials.

Interactive exams are also similar to the type of role-playing which occurs in oral interviews (exams) in a foreign language course. During an oral interview in a French course, for example, the student (the French trainee) converses with the instructor, and while conversing, the instructor must assess the student's comprehension and performance. This duality is also present in interactive exams, because the interactor must act as a student while assessing the tutor trainee's performance. Just as Wilga Rivers contends that to accurately assess foreign language skills "we must test communicative ability in an act of communication" (367), so I believe we can best evaluate tutoring ability in an act of tutoring.

Before the Exam

Both the tutor trainees and the interactor need to be prepared before the exam. The trainees should have the details and the significance of the exam explained to them so they will treat the interactor as they would a real

tutee. For our exams the trainees are responsible for scheduling an hour (a thirty-minute tutorial followed by a thirty-minute discussion) with me (currently our only interactor) during exam week. Our trainees take the interactive exams very seriously because the exam is worth 10% of their final grade.

The tutor trainees can also participate in the preparations. For example, instead of the interactor creating just one student persona, the trainees can write short descriptions of student personalities and reasons why the student personalities would come to the writing center. Our trainees created such student descriptions as "Happy-go-lucky, more interested in socializing, giggly-headed freshman. . . . Needs help understanding thesis sentence for an English assignment," "visibly distressed, somewhat reluctant in discussing writing problems. . . . She wants to know how to 'fix' [the paper] but is not very good in communicating thoughts," and "easy-going, average intelligence, not overly shy or quiet. . . . Needs to generate ideas for a paper; has writer's block." Over-creativity (e.g., descriptions of mass murderers) is kept in check by reminding trainees they may end up tutoring the student they create.

When learning about the exam, our trainees have initially responded with relief: "Thank goodness it's not a three-hour written exam I need to cram for." However, as the time neared when they must tutor the writing center director, the trainees often began to worry about it. This fear has proven to be a healthy impetus for them to review the practicum's information. I know of trainees who spent many hours the week before the exam tutoring each other and discussing various tutoring situations so they could be prepared for our exam.

Before the interactive exam, the interactor needs to prepare both mentally and physically. The mental preparation is the most difficult, because the

interactor must "get in character" by assuming the emotions and thoughts of a certain student persona, as well as by understanding the writing concerns of that student. During the first set of exams I gave, I selected, ten minutes before each exam, a description from the stack of student persona descriptions and, if I could, I assumed that personality. There is, of course, great flexibility at this stage of the process. For example, I have used the same student essay to see the different approaches taken by each tutor (and they were often very different approaches), plus, for one set of trainees, I acted as an ESL student. The interactor would do well to choose personae and writing concerns to fit the assessment needs of the trainees.

Besides mentally preparing for this exam, the interactor must also physically prepare by dressing and acting as a student. If the interactor usually dresses nicely and/or wears a certain style of clothing, the interactor can help the trainees suspend their disbelief by changing into more student-like garb. I have worn my glasses instead of my contacts, donned blue jeans and tennis shoes, and carried a backpack laden with textbooks. Acting as a student is as important as dressing like one. To accomplish this, I fidgeted when my student persona was bored or confused, often forgot to bring pen and paper (and sometimes my essay), and sometimes chewed gum or drank a Coke. It helped greatly to have thought through these actions before the exam began.

During the Exam

The exam begins when the student persona (in the body of the interactor) enters the writing center. The trainee should be ready to greet and tutor my student persona as if she were a real student. Only one of the thirty-three trainees I have tested with this exam did not treat it with the necessary seriousness (that trainee successfully retook the exam a few days later).

For the most part, the trainees have quickly been able to think of me as a student. The following comments are from a questionnaire which trainees submitted anonymously after the interactive exams. Two of the questions on the questionnaire are "Were you comfortable?" and "Did you feel it was realistic enough?"

"Yes, I was very comfortable. . . . I was convinced! It was extremely realistic; I forgot it was really you."

"I was uncomfortable at the beginning, knowing that you were evaluating me. Trying to anticipate the scenario made my palms sweat—but after we got started it went well and my anxiety dissipated."

"I found the tutoring exam effective. You took on a personae and kept in character well. At first I thought it was going to be very difficult tutoring someone who already knew everything. But it was actually very easy."

"I hate to role play, but as the session went on, I forgot you were Dr. Archer."

Surprisingly, the ability of the trainees to tutor the my student personae has not been a problem. Only a few of the trainees reported that they were never able to think of me as a student during the exam; the others were able to view me as a student a few minutes into the exam.

One of the most challenging aspects of interactive exams for the interactor is the dual thinking required throughout the tutorial. The interactor must be convincing as a student; he or she must respond to the tutor's questions and suggestions in a manner consistent with the chosen student persona. Simultaneously, the interactor must be evaluating the tutor's skills. What I discovered after using this method thirty-three times is that the student persona becomes the dominant (or sur-

face) personality, while the evaluator persona is recessive, manifested only as mental comments interjected at key moments (such as "I wonder what he will do now?" and "We have a handout she could use to explain paragraph structure"). The evaluator persona sat in the back of my mind, usually just recording the tutor's actions and the student persona's thoughts and actions.

A particularly difficult student persona makes a good example of this duality of thought and of the need for tutors to sometimes act as counselors (Ryan 25) . The persona's description was of a student whose boyfriend of many years had just broken up with her; she needed to do well on the paper but was having great difficulty focusing on anything but her emotional pain. As this student persona, I was polite to the tutor, answered her questions quickly, but could not stop thinking about the fact that Todd was never coming back (I drew upon painful memories of a failed relationship I had   ). About ten minutes into the tutorial, the tutor sensed my distance and asked me if I was feeling okay. Tears began to well up in my eyes, and my student persona felt great relief in being able to share her tragedy with the tutor. The tutor offered to reschedule our tutorial, but the student persona desperately needed to revise the paper that evening, and, because she felt more relaxed after confiding in the tutor, could focus better on her writing. During these events the evaluator persona in me was observing how skillfully the tutor analyzed the student's writing needs, what different strategies the tutor used to try to get the student to respond more, how the tutor's smile made the student's sadness worsen, and how the tutor listened attentively during the brief description of the break up. If I had been observing this tutorial from five feet away, I would not have been privy to many   of these complexities and would not have known that the student, though responsive, retained nothing the tutor had said during the first ten minutes of the tuto-rial.

After the Exam

Immediately after the exam the trainee and interactor should spend time discussing the tutorial. I have found that thirty minutes is usually adequate unless there are serious flaws with the tutoring or the trainee has lots of questions. I also recommend moving to another location (across the writing center or into the evaluator's office) so that the dynamics between trainee and interactor (as interactor, not as student) can be re-established. I would go across the hall, fill out the evaluation sheet (which lists the criteria so I could quickly make comments about each criterion) while the trainee remains in the writing center, spending a few minutes to complete the tutorial summary sheet.

As soon as the trainee joins the interactor, the trainee should be the first to describe the tutorial. If the trainee doesn't give enough details, I ask some basic questions. What techniques do you think worked well? What could be improved upon? What insights about writing do you think the student gained during the tutorial? (See Brannon 108, for a handful of excellent questions.) Our trainees often began by saying, "Oh, I thought I did a terrible job" or "I felt pretty comfortable, but I wasn't sure about. . . ." Only by listening to the trainees' insights and impressions can the interactor adequately assess what the trainees do and do not know about their strengths and weaknesses as tutors.

After the trainee comments on the tutorial, the student persona responds. I usually prefaced such comments with "As the student, I. . . ." For example, "As the student, I didn't understand what you meant by 'dangling modifier'" or "As the student, I was glad you asked me that question because it reminded me about something I had read and could use in my argument." I tell the trainees if they tried to lead me in directions I didn't want to go, what

terms and explanations I found confusing, what actions or statements insulted or inspired me, when I understood their advice, how I would have revised the paper according to their guidance, and whether or not I would have returned to the writing center. Our trainees were often surprised by the student persona's impressions of the tutorial. Throughout the student persona's discourse the trainees often interjected comments such as "I was wondering about that," "Really?" and "I knew I should have done that differently."

After the student persona has spoken, the evaluator persona should comment on the various aspects of tutoring which the trainee did and did not fulfill. I usually go down the list of ten criteria[2] on the evaluation sheet, explaining why I rated each as I did. By doing so, I am sure to cover all aspects of the tutorial, and the trainee is left with a clear idea of which techniques are done well and which need to be improved.

Strengths of Exam

The greatest benefit of using the interactive exam method to assess tutor trainees is that it takes the evaluator into the mind of the student. Other assessment methods (such as observing, videotaping, and collecting student evaluations) cannot reach this level of insight. Observing from a distance limits the evaluator only to hearing the student and tutor's discussion and to watching body language for clues about affective responses. The distant evaluator cannot see the student's paper nor assess the student's mental reactions to the tutor's words and actions. Using evaluation forms completed by students may provide only moderate assessment insights, because students often respond vaguely or too positively (so as not to hurt the tutor who helped them).[3] Even wonderfully complex assessment programs such as the "Writing Center Conference Diagnostic" used by DePaul University's Writing Center (Bowden 167) must rely on the comments of stu-

dents who may not be able to completely assess a tutorial because they lack a pedagogical understanding of the tutoring process.[4] Interactive exams, however, allow the knowledgeable evaluator to know the student's writing needs, see which writing concerns in the student's paper are addressed by the tutor, and understand how the student might react to the tutor's techniques.

Assessing the tutorial from the inside can provide information necessary for fully understanding a tutor's skills. As an interactor I have been startled several times by how some tutors' abilities are perceived differently during interactive exams than during observations. For example, while observing a trainee tutoring, I noted she came across as very friendly and willing to help; however, my impression of her from inside the tutorial was very different; when I was the student she was tutoring, I perceived her as being too patronizing and a bit arrogant. A second trainee I observed tutoring seemed less friendly and a little slow at times, but this same trainee, when viewed through the eyes of my student persona, came across as pleasant and patient, putting me at ease and encouraging me to talk freely about my writing. Clearly, interactive exams can offer valuable (and often startling) insights not available through other assessment means.

Weaknesses of Exam

The few weaknesses of interactive exams and of how one uses them can usually be overcome. First, these mentally-taxing exams require at least one hour from the interactor per trainee. If this creates an unmanageable schedule for one interactor (mentally, I can only handle three exams per day), the workload can be distributed to other evaluators, such as highly-experienced tutors. Second, these exams require a small amount of acting ability; if the writing center director feels uncomfortable about such role-playing, an experienced tutor could act the part.

The two weaknesses in our program's use of this assessment method are that the exam involves only one tutorial from one interactor. Doing at least two exams would assure a better assessment of the range of each trainees' talents. The weakness of assessing the tutorial from only one perspective could be corrected by videotaping the interactive exam. This would be ideal in that it would allow the trainee and the interactor to view the tutorial as they discuss it.

Conclusion

Interactive exams provide data from inside the tutorial which other means of tutorial assessment (such as observing, videotaping, and student evaluations) cannot provide. Interactive exams allow the interactor to see the student's writing, know what the student is thinking, and understand how the trainee is affecting the student. These exams can be used as part of a tutor practicum and as a means of continual tutor evaluation and education.

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Notes

[1] I chose the term "interactor" because the connotation of this interactive role is not captured by other terms: "evaluator" and "assessor" sound too authoritarian, "observer" does not reflect the active nature of the role-playing, and "actor" describes the outward activity well but not the duality of the inner activity.

[2] The ten criteria on our evaluation sheet are friendliness, question use, student involvement, assessment of student's writing, knowledge of writing, use of handouts/handbooks, professionalism, opening of tutorial, closing of tutorial, and paperwork.

[3] See Muriel Harris's "Multiservice Writing Lab in a Multiversity" for more about overly-positive student evaluations.

[4] DePaul's Writing Center Conference Diagnostic (WCCD) consists of the following steps: Facilitator-Consultant Preliminary Meeting, Facilitator-Student Meeting, Facilitator-Consultant Follow-Up, and Consultant-Student Dialogue. I agree with Bowden that the WCCD would be an excellent way for all participants to exchange ideas and learn more about the tutoring process; however, as an assessment technique, it is more time-consuming, complex, and comment-observation based than interactive exams.

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TUTORS' COLUMN

The most challenging situation

Things were working out just fine for me until one day I had an encounter with a student who came to the Writing Center (and I firmly believe this) with the intention of "testing one of those tutors to see how much he/she really knows." Poor me! From the moment the student sat down, the interrogation had begun! The first question she asked was if I was an English major and how long I had been tutoring writing. I told the student that I was a psychology major and had been tutoring writing for two semesters. The student then responded by saying that since I was a psychology major, then I was "not qualified to tutor English." I then asked the student if she knew what qualifications were required for someone to tutor writing. The student replied that the person must be able to "teach good English and write papers with only A grades." I realized that the student was intent on prolonging that type of discourse, so I immediately changed the focus of discussion and asked her what the purpose of her visit was. The student replied that she came for proofreading of her paper.

We started reading her paper (a world humanities assignment) and I was "scared as hell" to pinpoint the "errors" because I was sure (my intuition was on target) that the student was going to ask me for comprehensive historical details to explain why I thought that "something was wrong." Deep down inside I knew that although I was able to figure out why "something did not fit," I might not be able to explain my rationale. I began to think about two options: Should I run through her paper and tell her that it

was perfect (this would have been a travesty because her paper was far from perfect) and relieve myself from the torture, or should I face up to the rigid interrogation and prove to the student that I deserve to be a writing tutor? I chose the latter; what an experience!

During the remainder of the session which lasted about forty minutes, I was bombarded with questions and cross-examinations on every conceivable aspect of her work that I indicated as needing adjustments. I did my best on my part of the explanations and in return I also had her explaining to me why she wrote or did certain things in the paper. At first the student was getting very frustrated and angry by having to explain why she had certain structures, but by talking about her writing and why she repeatedly made the same errors, she began to realize that she was actually correcting the paper for herself and learning in the process.

The session ended and I was relieved. Somehow I was hoping that maybe the student would interrogate another tutor in her next appointment: not me please, I didn't deserve double jeopardy; I am protected by the Constitution! Little did I suspect that she went straight to the appointment office and made an appointment specifically to see me on her next visit.

When we met for the next session, the same student was one of the most respectful and willing students that I ever tutored. I had paid my dues.

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*T*UTORS' COLUMN

The re-entry student: On both sides of the table

Picture the following scenario: you've received your assigned tutorial papers from the professor, read them through two or three times, made your penciled comments, and now wait for the moment of truth—the student conference. As you review the paper for your first appointment, you look up to see someone sitting across from you who is old enough to be your *mother*.

The fact is, more and more older people are returning to college each year: some after a successful career and others to improve their job opportunities. From my own experience I have found that an average class of 45 students will usually have two or three re-entry students. The chances that you will draw one or more to tutor are rapidly increasing.

How do you tutor re-entry students and what do they need from the writing tutor? I have been on both sides of the table, last year as a re-entry student writer and this year as a tutor. There is no question that older students present some unique challenges for the tutor and have some unusual needs as a student.

Before returning to school, I spent 33 years in business management positions. I have composed letters to corporate presidents, written sales brochures and proposals for million dollar contracts, and authored a company policy manual. Yet as I approached my first writing assignment in English 212, I was as nervous as any 18-year-old freshman. My anxiety level soared when the professor announced that our papers would be read by a student tutor. I know I am not alone in this feeling as I have talked to other re-entry students who have related the same feelings of insecurity about their first writing attempts after returning to school. One friend, who was a successful bank manager for many years, returned to school after retirement and reported having panic attacks when she faced her first one-to-one tutorial conference with a peer 45 years her junior. The fear of failure is strong, and the possibility of face-to-face humiliation is much more threatening than the anonymity of simply receiving a graded paper back with the professor's written comments.

At the same time, the traditional student may have some serious misgivings about tutoring the re-entry student. When I finally got my essay down on paper and met with my tutor, the first words out of her mouth were, "I've never tutored an English major before," but her insecure behavior translated to: "You're a lot older than I am. What can I teach you?" Well, the answer is—plenty!

Be aware that re-entry students have serious misgivings about their ability to succeed in the academic arena. We look around at all of the quick, young minds, and our own brains feel like a soggy sponge. Re-entry is a good word for us, because it's a lot like coming from outer space and splashing down in the middle of the ocean. We are awash in new experiences that can be overwhelming. We may not know a comma splice from a banana split, or a dangling modifier from a trapeze artist. Don't be frightened by our age and experience; you know more about what is expected at the college level than we

do. Encourage us and boost our confidence, but don't hesitate to point out our writing problems. Be aware that we are probably inordinately concerned with punctuation: commas are used much more sparingly than they were 30 years ago. Explain what a comma splice is; if the opening paragraph is dull, say so. Show us how to use the *MLA Handbook*, or introduce us to a grammar handbook. If your school has a writing center, tell us about it and encourage us to use it. These things didn't even exist prior to 1970.

Some older students may have problems with the "*I'd rather do it myself*" syndrome. Don't be put off by this attitude. In reality, it is probably just a cover-up for some deep-rooted insecurities. Proceed just as you would with any other student. Listen to our concerns, answer our questions, give us your honest feedback, and don't be intimidated. For the most part, however, I think you will find us eager for your suggestions and appreciative of any help you can give us. Re-entry students are usually highly motivated; returning to school isn't something we have to do, but something we want to do. Most of us have waited many years for this opportunity, and once we understand that the writing tutor is a resource who will help us achieve our goals, you will find us to be your loyal and enthusiastic supporters.

So, did my student tutor help me? I'll say she did! She taught me how to analyze my writing and pointed out some of my pitfalls, such as needless words like "*that*" and *"very"*; sentence fragments; abrupt leaps in ideas without

lead-in sentences; and yes, my punctuation errors. As we both relaxed and became more comfortable with each other, the ideas and questions flowed freely between us. By the time our appointment was over, I was excited to get back to the computer and start making the revisions we had talked about. With her help, my writing improved to the point that I was recommended for the student tutor program at the end of the quarter.

After I was accepted as a tutor, the old "*re-entry anxiety*" surfaced again, but this time I shrugged it off and plunged right in. I found that the younger students seemed to take comfort from my maturity; my age didn't present any discernible barriers. I also had the opportunity to tutor Carol, a re-entry student, which was a very satisfying experience. Having sat across the table myself only a year before, I had a pretty good idea of her concerns. It wasn't just her writing she wanted reassurance about, it was the whole re-entry experience. The day she handed in her paper, I met her in the hall between classes. She thanked me for my help and told me she had been thinking of me as she put the finishing touches on her paper the night before. Carol and I have formed a friendship that

will go beyond our tutoring session, a situation singular to our both being re-entry students.

Can the re-entry student be a successful writer and benefit from tutoring? You bet. Can the re-entry student be successful as a tutor? Again, the answer is an emphatic *yes*. Our hair may be gray, our hearing dim, and our movements a little slow, but we still have much to offer in the academic situation. Accept us as peers, treat us with respect, and give our writing the same careful attention you expect for your own.

We can be our own audience

more successful than others. Interesting enough, what I found was already written in the philosophy of our center; however, these things seem more meaningful to me now than at the beginning of the semester.

Charlene A. Hirschi
Peer Tutor
Utah State University
Logan, UT

While Claudia goes on to detail some of the specific tutoring principles that she has come to understand, I'm most delighted in seeing how she has transformed a required record-keeping practice into an important part of her educational growth as a tutor.

When I review these reports, I find a wide range of reporting styles—almost mirroring the variety of tutoring styles of the various individuals working at our writing center. Some tutors write

very informative narratives about a session while others write very cryptic notes; others reflect on things they did that either did or did not work, sometimes even directly questioning their methods on the report; and still others will record what the student writer plans to do next. And when tutors need to vent about a session in order to understand what happened or didn't happen, they feel free to do so.

Which brings me back to looking at the issues concerning session reports and using them to educate ourselves. I'd like to think that our methods are both a reflection of our philosophy and a response to our situation. I know we will continue to discuss the session report, especially in the preparation course required of all new tutors. I also know I like the idea of allowing the tutors to discover what needs to be in a session report by doing them and reading them—and talking about them in class. Providing tutors with the opportunity to reflect on what they are doing and why is, in my view, the best way to educate tutors.

Here, we view the CCNY Writing Center as another educational site within the university—for both the students who work here and the students who come here to talk about writing. I view the tutor preparation course as a way of educating students to educate others, and I view the session reports as part of the educational process for *all* of the students who make use of the writing center. Our records can do more than just keep us informed about what we do—they can help us reflect on how and why we do what we do.

Kim Jackson
City College of New York
New York, NY

National Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals
Sept. 17-20, 1997
Park City, Utah

All members of the NWCA and other interested parties are invited to the mountain resort community of Park City, Utah, for the NWCA's third conference. Request a proposal form or a registration form from Penny C. Bird, Brigham Young University, English Department, Box 26280, Provo, Utah 84602-6289. Fax: 801-378-4720; phone: 801-378-5471; e-mail: penny_bird@byu.edu Proposal deadline: March 15, 1997.

The benefits of a tutor-mentor program

Muriel Harris has said that the process of creating a writing center is like "building a violin while playing it" (*Slate* Starter Sheet 2). Anyone who works in or closely with a writing center can see how well this analogy applies. Programs develop and grow out of attempts to meet the changing needs of students and tutors. One such tutor program has recently taken shape in our writing center, and its success has dramatically improved the way tutors interact among themselves and with students.

Tutorial Classes

Our writing center used to offer just one three-unit tutorial class each semester. The class was and still is designed for first-semester tutors and entails:

- Five hours of tutoring time in the writing center per week
- Attendance at bi-weekly workshop classes, two hours each
- Completion of a 2000-word research paper on a topic related to the writing center or tutoring
- Reading of the tutorial text for the class (Leigh Ryan's *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*), handouts, and articles relating to writing and writing centers
- Writing one to three journal entries each week that are connected to the tutorial text or to the tutors' observations in the writing center

This first-semester tutorial class is intended for first-time tutors, and therefore does not serve those tutors who want to return a second or even third semester.

The new tutor-mentor class is designed to provide these returning tutors with challenging materials and assignments. This three-unit class includes:

- Five hours of tutoring/mentoring in the writing center each week
- Attendance at bi-weekly workshop classes (an extra credit option)
- Meeting with the director weekly to discuss observations, problems, suggestions for improvements, and progress of the tutors they are mentoring
- Reading and commenting on journal entries written by new tutors

How the Tutor-Mentor Program Works

Currently, thirteen returning tutors are enrolled in the tutor-mentor class and serve as mentors in our writing center. At the beginning of the semester, each mentor is teamed with one, two, or three new tutors. On scheduled shifts, the mentors supervise the new tutors, showing them how our filing systems work, how to use our handouts, and how to sign up students to do writing-related work in the center. The mentors also explain our tutoring practices, strategies, and principles. Most of these tasks are accomplished within the first two weeks of the semester, while activity in the center is fairly slow.

As activity picks up in the center, new tutors observe mentors during tutoring sessions until the tutors feel confident enough to work in the center on their own, usually after two to three weeks. Thereafter, they continue to work closely with their mentors, whom they go to when questions arise or when a tough paper needs a second reader.

In addition to working with the new tutors, mentors read two of the three journal entries written by the new tutors for their tutorial projects class. I read one of these entries myself. New tutors share their entries with the tutorial class and then give them to me. I check them off in my gradebook, keep the one designated for me, and return the other entries to the appropriate mentors. Mentors comment on the entries (giving advice, suggesting strategies, proposing solutions, and expressing sympathy when necessary) and return them to the tutors. For this work, the mentors receive partial class credit.

Assessment of the Program

The tutor-mentor program offers many benefits. New tutors need an experienced person to rely on in the writing center, especially in the first two or three weeks. They are helped by the comments on their journal entries, too. The ready help and written responses give them an immediate sense of being an integral part of the writing center.

New tutors receive more attention than the writing center director alone could ever give them. They receive prompt help in answering questions and addressing problems during their shifts; they receive detailed and abundant responses to their journal entries; and they make friends and bond to an extent I would find hard to achieve in one semester.

The mentors, for their part, welcome the responsibility that comes with their duties. Teaching someone about our writing center reinforces the principles and procedures of the center. Responding to the journal entries sharpens their critical thinking skills, and they learn how to encourage, sympathize, and offer suggestions. They are teaching on a small scale, and I cannot think of any training at the junior college level that

would so well prepare them to teach (or lead) on a larger scale some day. Both the experience and the course also look good on their resumes and applications.

This program benefits not only the new tutors and the mentors but our students as well. The writing center is now able to provide better service to 800 students, better because it is run by a well-coordinated, enthusiastic, experienced staff.

Conclusion

One of the greatest strengths of the mentor program is that it gives continuity to the tutoring program and the writing center. In the past, our tutor training has had to begin each semester with inexperienced tutors. Tutors still pass through our program on their way to state colleges and universities, but the center's infrastructure remains intact largely because many tutors continue in the mentor program.

This program also gives the director greater control over the center's standards, procedures, and quality of tutoring without a great deal of visible governance. Moreover, because tutors are interactive, helpful ideas and practical suggestions are shared by everyone. Each semester ideas generated by the tutors make for an increasingly effective, efficiently run center, and these ideas, in turn, become part of the program and are carried forward.

The tutor-mentor program has brought greater unity to our writing center as well as continuity. The program has increased our effectiveness and given our training procedures clearer definition and direction. Not the least of its benefits is that the mentors feel more than ever responsible for the quality of tutoring we provide. Though not permanent staff, they now recognize that their effort has permanent value.

Looking Ahead

Although the mentor program is working well, improving it continues to be our goal. Next semester, mentors — not now required to attend training classes —will attend at least the first class. In this way, mentors and new tutors will begin the semester with a communal spirit, common purpose, and a clear sense of shared objectives. Improvements might be made, too, in how often the tutors and their mentors interact. Currently all mentors and tutors on each shift meet briefly once a week to discuss observations, feelings, suggestions, and problems. However, mentor-tutor teams could meet more frequently to discuss general concerns and to deal with special needs of individual students. We have found that the more we talk among ourselves, the more responsible we feel and the better we perform our duties.

———————————

Though we have fashioned a viable, effective writing center, our mentor program has given it the flexibility it needs to remain fully responsive and responsible to a constantly shifting student population.

Barbara Jensen
Modesto Junior College
Modesto, CA

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

Works Cited

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Ryan, Leigh. *The Redford Guide for Writing Tutors*. Boston: Bedford Books, St. Martin's, 1994.

October 4-5: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Paul, MN Contact: Ginger Young, Central Missouri State University, Humphreys 120, 320 Goodrich Drive, Warrensburg, MO 64093

Oct. 24-26: Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association, in Albuquerque, NM Contact: Anne Mullin, Writing Lab, Campus Box 8010, Idaho State University, Pocatello, ID 83209 (208-236-3662).

Nov. 2: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in Portland, OR Contact: Karen Vaught-Alexander, University of Portland Writing Center, 5000 N. Willamette Blvd., Portland, OR 97203-5798. Phone: 503-283-7461; e-mail: karenva@uofport.edu

Feb. 28: Northern California Writing Centers Association, in Hayward, CA Contact: Kimberly Pratt, Division of Language Arts, Chabot College, 25555 Hesperian Blvd., Hayward, CA 94545. Phone: 510-786-6950.

March 1: New England Writing Centers Association, in Providence, RI Contact: Meg Carroll, Writing Center, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI 02908; e-mail: mcarroll@grog.ric.edu

April 18-19: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Pittsburgh, PA Contact: Margaret Marshall, Dept. of English, Cathedral of Learning, U. of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260; phone: 412-624-6555; e-mail: marshall+@pitt.edu

April 18-20: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Augusta, GA Contact: Karin Sisk, Augusta College, Writing Center, Dept. of Languages, Literature, and Communications, Augusta, Georgia 30904-2200. Fax: 706-737-1773; phone: 706-737-1402 or 737-1500; e-mail: ksisk@ac.edu

Sept. 17-20: National Writing Centers Association, in Park City, UT Contact: Penny C. Bird, English Dept., Brigham Young U., Box 26280, Provo, UT 84602-6280. Fax: 801-378-4720; phone: 801-378-5471; e-mail: penny_bird@byu.edu

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Defining our terms

What exactly are "ethics" anyway?

As you might expect, this is not an easy —or a simple —question to answer. Philosophers have been struggling to define this concept for thousands of years, both in terms of ethics' relation to larger philosophical systems and also in terms of the practical consequences it has for the governance of human conduct. In a short column such as this one, I know it's a forlorn hope that I will be able to offer anything more than the briefest of overviews of such a rich and complex field, but I believe nonetheless that a review of some general principles that run through the work of many ethical philosophers can enlighten our understanding of the ways in which ethics have a strong impact on our work in writing centers. If we are to act ethically as tutors, we should be aware of the foundation of our ethics, we should have the capacity to articulate the principles that undergird that foundation, and we should be able to apply those principles across a wide spectrum of students and contexts. In this month's column, I plan to get us started on a path toward achieving these goals, a plan that begins with a little bit of history and a little bit of philosophy. (I should state in advance that the bulk of this column will be devoted to a presentation of these principles, and that in next month's column I will begin to address more specifically how they apply to writing centers. So take a big drink of your Mountain Dew or Jolt Cola now if you need it, and let's get started. . . .)

The study of ethics has a long and illustrious history, beginning—in the Western canon, at least—with Plato (*Gorgias* and *Philebus*) and Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*), and even these early philosophers recognized that ethics—the principles that characterized and determined "good" actions—were not easily described in terms of universals. Plato's primary interest in *Gorgias* and *Philebus* was a characterization of "the good," and an exploration of whether "good" was synonymous with "pleasure," whether it was more closely related to "wisdom," or whether it was some other abstract quality connected to both but analogous to neither. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle, too, considered the nature of "the good," and though he did admit that there may, indeed, be some ideal quality of goodness (the "Supreme Good") which is equivalent to "happiness" or "the virtuous life," he nevertheless realized that "goodness" is not a concept that is easily defined or realized:

> We may now return to the Good which is the object of our search, and try to find out what exactly it can be. For good appears to be one thing in one pursuit or art and another in another: it is different in medicine from what it is in strategy, and so on with the rest of the arts. What definition of the Good then will hold true in all the arts? (10-11)

The shared themes in the works of both Plato and Aristotle—good, bad, right, wrong, duty, responsibility, moral behavior, and immoral conduct—comprise the core topics, the tropes of ethics and ethical philosophy. As Ian McGreal states in *Problems of Ethics*:

Specifically, ethics is the attempt to abstract, clarify, and examine the ideas of good and evil, right and wrong, duty and obligation." (1)

But how is "the good" to be determined? How is it to be conceived? How is it to be measured? And how is it to be evaluated? What is the relationship between "goodness" and context? How can this relationship be described in a meaningful way and used to construct an ethics for a writing center (or any other entity for that matter)?

One way to begin answering this question is to consider how different ethical philosophers have tried to solve the problem of "the good" and then to see if any of these systems seems particularly applicable to writing center practice. Though many schemes have been advanced to taxonomize ethical systems, one particularly useful system—one which has been used by several historians of ethics, William Lillie and John Mackenzie among them— groups solutions to "The Problem of the Good" according to the *ethical standard* they uphold, the highest, most transcendent ethical principle in a given philosophy of moral conduct which can be used to adjudicate relative degrees of "goodness" in any context and argue for an appropriate set of behaviors. Though this classification system is prone to oversimplify the many complexities inherent in systematic ethical philosophies, it nevertheless provides a rich starting point to see some of the significant ways in which ethical frameworks clash, contrast, and overlap. In brief, these standards (according to Lillie and Mackenzie) are as follows:

• Intuition
• Law
• Pleasure
• Evolution
• Perfection
• Value

Lillie attributes the standard of "intuition" to the philosophies of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Butler, and it is, in essence, an argument for *moral innateness*. Human beings are, according to this perspective, born with a fundamental, intuitive understanding of right and wrong, and they can appeal to this inborn sense to determine the proper solutions to ethical problems. The standard of intuition stands in notable contrast to the standard of "law," however, which maintains that there are certain indisputable, law-like principles, *not* innate in the human psyche but discernible by objective observers, which can be used to assess the ethical value of a given behavior. The source of these principles varies somewhat from philosopher to philosopher. Some, like Samuel Clarke (*Discourse upon Natural Religion*), look to "natural law" as the basis for moral standards; others, like Kant (*The Metaphysics of Morals*), turn to the laws of reason and logic as the ultimate arbiters of morality.

The standard of "pleasure," like law, has been interpreted in a variety of ways, from a kind of unrestrained individualism (egoistic hedonism) to a view that people should always try to achieve "the greatest good for the greatest number" (utilitarianism). The Greek Cyrenaics and the Epicureans believed in varying versions of the former philosophy, while John Stuart Mill (*Utilitarianism*), Henry Sidgwick (*Methods of Ethics*), and Jeremy Bentham (*Principles of Morals and Legislation)* argued for different versions of the latter. The central question for many of these writers was, of course, "What is pleasure?" and the answers they proposed ranged from pleasurable physical sensations to intellectual satisfaction to the fulfillment of an abstract goal.

The standards of "evolution" and "perfection" advance the general principle that human beings should work toward their own ethical self-realization. Herbert Spencer (*The Principles of Ethics*) adopted an evolutionary and teleological view of ethical development, largely influenced by Darwin's work, saying that life consists of a protracted series of adjustments based on consequences. We are faced with ethical problems, we try out solutions, we judge the results of our solutions, and we adjust our ethics depending on whether we feel the outcomes were beneficial or not. In this way, our ethical systems evolve over time, gradually becoming better and better. There is a kind of *natural selection* evident in this process, says Spencer—both for individuals and for society in general—as the better ethical systems and preferred consequences will naturally replace those systems less able to produce beneficial results. Hegel and T.H. Green (*Prolegomena to Ethics*) believed in the standard of perfection as well, but their ethical philosophies focused primarily on the quest for spiritual perfection. For Hegel, this spiritual perfection was to be achieved in social life through the continual evolutionary interplay of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; for Green, this perfection could be reached by the use of reason in the pursuit of the "moral ideal."

The final standard in this taxonomic system, the standard of "value," is in some ways the most problematic of them all. What, exactly, is "value" and how does one measure it? This is the same question which was asked about the concept "good," and it seems subject to the same diversity of interpretation. One distinction that can be made, perhaps, is that "value" can be assessed either on the basis of *intrinsic* worth (which is equivalent to an absolute or deontological perspective), or it can be assessed on the basis of its *extrinsic* worth (that is, its usefulness, consequences, or teleology). In his *Principia Ethica*, G.E. Moore makes a case for the intrinsic goodness of some things like "beautiful objects" or "the pleasure of human intercourse," and he also attempts to explain how this intrinsic goodness derives from their being "organic wholes" greater than the sum of their parts. Though this is a rather vague definition, Moore's point—that there are some actions which can be considered "good" in and of themselves—seems to have merit, even if the criteria by which those actions are measured remain somewhat vague and defined in circular terms. A well-composed student paper, for instance, might appear to embody Moore's sense of the good: an "organic whole" whose value as a text is greater than the sum of its individual words.

Now that we have a scheme in place for talking about ethics and providing some simple definitions and distinctions, next month I can consider how some of these ethical systems might apply to writing centers.

Michael A. Pemberton
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NWCA Press

Carl Glover is the new business manager of the NWCA Press and now has all copies of *Writing Center Perspectives* (the book reviewed by Sharon Strand in the September 1996 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*). To order a copy, contact him as follows:

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Understanding human nature through tutoring

When I decided to begin my graduate work in English after five years of teaching high school, I was awarded a fellowship as a tutor in my university's writing center. I was excited to continue teaching while I was also busy studying because teaching was important to me, and I didn't want to give it up even for my years in graduate school. What I was not prepared for, however, is that being a tutor would teach me things that I never learned standing in front of the classroom. As I finish my first year working as a writing center tutor, many of my beliefs about writing and teaching have changed. The unique perspective gained from tutoring students has allowed me to look at writing in a new light. Some of my most important discoveries about writing, teaching, and tutoring follow. These discoveries are more far reaching than just writing and teaching, though—they will have an impact on other portions of my life as well.

Trust comes easiest to a peer.

No matter how much students trust a teacher, they usually feel better talking with a peer. During my years teaching high school, I served as the director of my school's drama program. In that capacity I built very strong bonds with my students. I was one of the teachers most students felt comfortable with, and they often shared problems and concerns with me. When I worked with these students on their writing, though, we weren't as successful as I expected. Since I began working in the writing center, I started to understand why. Peers are perceived as less threatening

by a student than even the most supportive teacher; discussing writing with a teacher is akin to working with an expert, while discussing it with a colleague can serve as a way to bounce ideas around. Even though I'm older than most of my clients in the writing center and have experience as a teacher, because they see me as a peer, they are less afraid of me.

When trying to teach someone a new skill, start with what they have instead of with what they haven't.

Grammar is best understood when taught through a student's text. Grammar instruction in many schools is constrained by a prescribed curriculum, indicating chapters in the grammar book that must be taught in a certain order. Teachers usually hate teaching them (I did) just as much as students hate learning them, but we do it, thinking that we're preparing the students for life after high school. Students coming into the writing center, however, constantly tell me that they never listened to those "torture sessions," and that they've learned more in our fifty-minute sessions than they did in high school. This isn't because they had bad teachers, or even that the students didn't pay attention. (One of my ex-students attends this university, and while he hasn't come to the center yet, I'm sure it's not because I taught him everything he needed to know.) Students learn grammar when it's applied to their own writing. Transitions make sense not when recited from a list, but when used to move from one part of an essay to another, for example. If gram-

mar is just a homework assignment, it doesn't seem important. If it fixes a problem the student is having, it is important. Students should see grammar as a logical rhetorical strategy rather than a set of rules to be memorized.

Speak to others in their own language and on their own level.

All that writing we do on student papers is either ignored or misunderstood by most students. I always read what the teacher said to me, so I assumed that my students did too. If they read my comments, though, why were the students making the same mistakes on the next paper? I never solved this problem, but after becoming a tutor it's all very clear; they never read those comments. When I first realized this, I was crushed. So did my students learn anything from my analysis of their writing? My clients in the writing center have told me that while some do read their comments, others only look for the grade, or try to interpret the teacher's comments but can't make sense of them. These writers prove to me that what my students would have benefited from instead of (or perhaps in addition to) written comments on their papers is a conference. Which leads me to my next point.

Field-specific jargon confuses most of us unless it happens to be our field.

Students need to be taught how to talk about writing. I'd guess that over half of the students who meet with me in tutoring sessions say that they want help with "the flow." Just what exactly

does this word mean to students? Some understand what they mean, but many more are just echoing the jargon they've heard from writing teachers. In order to carry on a meaningful discussion about a student's writing, teachers first need to talk about *how* to talk about writing. Terms like flow, coherence, theme, organization, analysis, and development are words English teachers use with ease, but we should not assume that students understand them.

Our self-esteem determines the amount of work we're willing to expend on a project.

Most of all, students need to feel good about their writing. I don't mean to say we should pass out meaningless compliments, but I think we should pass them out more frequently. A confident writer is eager to revise a paper so that it becomes better, but a doubting writer just wants to do the assignment as quickly and painlessly as possible. As the director of our writing center says, "Nobody wants to be told they have an ugly baby."

While I'm not sure what level or in what situation I'll end up teaching again, I know that with my experience in the writing center as a tutor, I'll be a better teacher. Working with students face to face gives teachers a unique experience into how a writer thinks, and what a writer fears. Even more than that, though, I've learned a lot about human nature.

Pamela C. Murphy
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A reader asks . . . . .

Recently our Writing Center received a grant to upgrade and expand its services. Our reference books, handbooks, workbooks (especially related to ESL materials and writing required in various disciplines), along with media packages and computer software are particularly skimpy and in need of updating (early 1980's, mostly). Can anyone send me (or suggest) a bibliography of some of the more useful, updated resources for any of these areas? Also, are there any "model" small college writing centers which have experienced similar recent upgrades or grants—or which could provide consultants or practical advice?

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