THE WRITING LAB

...FROM THE EDITOR...

Welcome back to another year and another volume of the newsletter. Though summer whizzed by when we weren't looking and it would be humane to have six more weeks (at least) before classes start, we can draw on each other's energies and insights as we plunge back into our work. Neal Lerner offers us a way to quantitatively demonstrate the effectiveness of our centers; co-authors Barbara Bell and Robert Stutts give us some perspectives on requiring students to attend tutorials; Michael Pemberton continues his discussion of ethical considerations when interacting with the teachers; and Tracy Turner shares her tutoring expertise in helping students revise.

And you'll notice the impressive collection of candidates for the NWCA Executive Board. After you read their statements, please send your ballots to the NWCA Secretary, Paula Gillespie. Finally, please share announcements of your regional's conference plans with other newsletter readers. (Sending information to me via e-mail is fine.)

I wish us all well as the pace picks up, the coffee pots empty faster and faster, and those nervous new tutors settle in as old hands in the tutoring game.

• Muriel Harris, editor

...INSIDE...

Counting beans and making beans count

One question that constantly swirls around our work in writing centers is the following: Are we helping to improve student writing? While this is simple to pose, finding answers seems fraught with logistical and political dilemmas. How can we assess this improvement? Should we? Isn't the writing center only one among the many influences that shape student learning, some of which might undermine the help we offer? And if we try to articulate our effects, what happens if we find we aren't making that much of a difference?

Still, institutional mandates, bean-counting administrators, and, ultimately, our professional standing often call for answers. My intention in this article is to demonstrate the use of quantitative methods to assess our contribution to student writing. Importantly, I do not intend what I present to be definitive "proof" that writing centers make a difference; instead, I would hope that readers apply the sorts of measures I describe to their own settings. After all, it is essential for us to control our futures by whatever means available. Consider that the next time President So-and-So asks you, "How's it going?" as you pass in the hall, you

can say, "Great, and I've detailed the results of my institutional research in the report I'm putting in your mailbox."

First a caveat: I know that numbers can obscure (and what I'm about to detail does reduce those complex human beings who come to our writing centers down to manageable integers). My own research into writing center settings has primarily used qualitative methods because it's the processes of interaction, goal setting, teaching and learning that make our work so fasci-

nating. Nevertheless, now that I've been cast out of the graduate school world and have been charged with running my own writing center, I've learned about a whole new level of accountability. No longer does my dissertation committee send me the occasional e-mail note with a terse plea for me to hand in a chapter or two. Now I get late-night phone calls from my department chair, telling me of impending budget cuts. If there's anything I've learned in my years as a composition instructor and writing center tutor, it's that I need to anticipate my audience's needs. College administrators often want numbers, digits, results. What follows are the methods I used to produce those legumes.

Preparing to count

About my context: I teach composition and direct the writing center in a college of pharmacy with a first-year class of approximately 130 students. Two semesters of expository writing/ composition are required during students' first year. The college does not offer stratified levels of composition (i.e., basic writing) though ESL students are placed into dedicated ESL sections, taught by experienced ESL faculty. During the fall 1996 semester, there were six faculty teaching nine total sections of composition—three of which were designated ESL.

In straightforward terms, I wanted to know if students in first-semester composition who came to the Writing Center during this past fall semester had higher grades than students who did not visit: the outcome—first-semester composition grades; the intervention—the Writing Center. The data that I needed to investigate my question were straightforward: accurate records of which students came to the Writing Center and grade sheets from each section of first-semester composition. Every student who visits the Writing Center fills out an entry form, and tutors record notes for each session once it is complete. On a weekly basis, I had been entering these records into a

FileMaker Pro database. The grade sheets were also easy to obtain once I asked the composition instructors and my department chair. To ensure confidentiality, I used only student ID numbers and, when releasing my results, made no references to specific students, only to aggregate grades.

This initial methodology had a problem: How could I be sure that these two groups were starting from a similar point? Perhaps the grades of those who used the Writing Center would be lower because they had weaker writing skills? Or perhaps the grades of this group would be higher because they had better learned the habits of successful students? I also knew that course grades are arguably not the most accurate measure of student writing; however, grades were accessible to me and can be persuasive evidence of student achievement. Still, I needed some sort of pre-first-semester-composition measure in order to equalize writing center users and non-users.

Starting points for our students are readily available. Most colleges and universities require a placement test of some sort, whether standardized or locally created. The measures to which I had access were students' SAT verbal scores. While the accuracy of this test as a measure of students' verbal abilities is arguable, as was true for students' composition grades, it met my criteria: accessible to me and credible to my intended audience. Thus, using reported verbal scores from 280 to 710, I chose roughly 50 point intervals to divide students into seven groups. I now had equal starting points based on the SAT verbal. Within each of the seven groups, I then compared the first-semester composition grades of those students who came to the Writing Center with those who did not. What I found was a pleasant surprise.

Full of beans

Before I summarize the results of my study, I do want to add a word of caution. Once I had grouped students ac-

cording to SAT verbal scores, I was dealing with small numbers, often fewer than 10 students per group. Grades within these groups could vary quite widely; thus, a mean score would have fairly large standard deviation. The statistically savvy would recoil in horror if I tried to make large claims about my results. Additionally, by grouping students from different sections of composition, I was obscuring the effects of instructors' varying grading practices (though pointing out these variations could mean a whole different set of political dilemmas). Nevertheless, for the purposes of semester-by-semester justification, for securing some portion of that shrinking pile of beans, results such as these can be far more persuasive to policy makers and budget disbursers than the anecdotal accounts or "felt-sense" reports that come easiest to us.

Overall, I found that most students' mean grades were quite similar whether or not they came to the Writing Center. However, students at the lowest end of the SAT verbal benefited the most; on a one-hundred point scale, the mean grade of this group was five points higher than students within the same SAT verbal range who did not come to the Writing Center. In fact, this "boost" meant that this group on average performed as well as students who had SAT verbal scores over 200 points higher! One other interesting finding was that the mean number of visits was highest for students in the lowest range of the SAT verbal and dropped off as students' SAT scores rose. Thus, students with the weakest starting skills (according to their SAT verbal scores) came to the Writing Center most often and benefited the most. Not a bad conclusion to present to an administrator concerned about supporting and retaining academically unprepared students.

One bean leads to another

I often tell my students that in their writing, they need to deal with the "So what?" question. Similarly, when we present studies of our writing centers, we should anticipate such a reaction. So what if these students who came to the writing center improved their grades? Well, you answer, grades are one essential component in the complex mix of factors that affect attrition, as are SAT scores. You stir the bean pot, search the literature, and come up with the following. One factor examined in several studies of student attrition is academic performance in the first year of college. Pascarella and Chapman found that first-semester GPA had a significant relationship to "voluntary persistence/withdrawal decisions" at residential universities. Additionally, in reviewing 20 years of research on the factors that determine students' decisions to withdraw from college, Bean and Metzner cite 12 empirical studies that report "a negative association between students' first-term grade average and attrition" (521).

Previous research has also shown a strong relationship between SAT scores and graduation rates. For example, the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA tracked students at 365 institutions and found that of students with combined SAT scores of less than 700, only 28.7% completed their degrees in 9 years or fewer. On the other hand, of the students on the highest end of SAT scores (1300+), 76.5% completed their degrees in the same period of time ("Institutional Graduation Rates" 3). These findings lead to the following: What factors can interfere with this trend and overcome a lack of academic preparation? In other words, can the academic support of a writing center contribute to student retention?

In my admittedly quick and localized study of first-year students, I found that of the students with the greatest chance of withdrawing from college, those who visited the Writing Center strengthened their first-semester grades. Whether or not these students will actually persist is certainly some-thing to be investigated further; nevertheless, I was pleased that the Writing Center could appear to make a contribution to students' academic performance and, perhaps, to their futures at my college.

Bean counters unite

While most writing centers are under constant pressure to justify their existences, at the same time there has been a reluctance to engage in the sorts of statistical measures I have outlined in this article. As William Yahner wrote:

> Although I have not attempted the daunting task of applying statistical operations to scientifically measure the total number of tutorials to determine the significance of our impact on student retention, I feel it is safe to conclude that the writing center has positively affected the retention rate. (5)

While an author's "felt sense" will often do little to further our cause, resources abound for us to engage in self-study. Math and statistics colleagues can help with the numbers, behavioral science faculty can help with the surveys, and offices of institutional research can point to the relevant literature. Ethnographies, analysis of discourse, and case-studies—among other research methods—are filling the gaps in what we know about our practices and building theory to guide our field's future. At the same time, it is an exciting prospect to imagine the results of localized quantitative research gathered in a central location (the National Writing Centers Association Web page, for instance) as large-scale evidence that writing centers can and do make a difference (Gillespie).

In the short term, our institutional survival is often dependent upon simple, straightforward numbers. As I have shown, the methods to produce these numbers can be equally simple.

Neal Lerner
Massachusetts College of Pharmacy &
Allied Health Science
Boston, MA

Works Cited

Bean, John P. and Barbara S. Metzner. "A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition." *Review of Educational Research* 55 (1985): 485-540.

Gillespie, Paula. Personal Communication. 15 Feb. 1997.

"Institutional Graduation Rates by Pre-College Academic Records." *Postsecondary Education Opportunity* Dec. 1996: 1-4.

Pascarella, Ernest T. and David W. Chapman. "Validation of a Theoretical Model of College Withdrawal: Interaction Effects in a Multi-Institutional Sample." *Research in Higher Education* 19 (1983): 25-48.

Yahner, William. "Explaining and Justifying Writing Centers: One MORE Example." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 18.2 (Oct. 1993): 5-6.

Call for Papers

Composition Studies/Freshman English News requests submissions for its new feature on course design. This feature, which will appear regularly in future issues, allows writing/rhetoric teachers at all post-secondary levels a unique opportunity to publish full descriptions of curricular development. Visit our web site for the complete project statement and submission guidelines. www.depaul.edu/~compstud

Quality essay submissions on issues of general interest to rhetoric and composition teachers and scholars are also strongly encouraged. Three titled, letter-quality copies conforming to current MLA guidelines for format and documentation, free of authors' names and other identifying references, should be accompanied by a cover letter.

Peter Vandenberg, Editor
Composition Studies
DePaul University
English
802 W. Belden Ave
Chicago, IL 60614
composition_studies@wppost.depaul.edu

NWCA Active Writing Center

NWCA plans to run an active writing center in the exhibit area at this year's annual NCTE Convention, November 20-22. The Executive Board of the National Writing Centers Association will staff an active writing center during exhibit hours at the NCTE convention in Detroit. Convention-goers will have an opportunity to drop in to the center for consultation on written works-in-progress: possible articles, papers for presentation, proposals for sessions, and so forth. In addition, information, materials, and publications about and sponsored by the National Writing Centers Association and NWCA Press will be on display. Anyone interested in participating as a "tutor" should contact :

Albert C. DeCiccio, Program Chair
Dean of the Faculty of Liberal Arts
Merrimack College
North Andover, MA 01845
508-837-5244
Fax: 508-837-5078

Learning Assistance Association of New England (LAANE)

October 24, 1997
Burlington, MA
"The Right to Higher Education"
keynote speaker: Jan Paschal

LAANE members teach developmental courses, administer freshman year and tutoring programs, counsel students, tutor students with disabilities, and provide other student services. For information, contact Mary Leslie, Director of Developmental Skills, University of Maine at Augusta, 253 Augusta Civic Center, 46 University Drive, Augusta, ME 04330. Phone: 207-621-3151. E-mail: LESLIE@Maine.maine.edu

Conference on the Teaching of Writing

October 24, 1997
Fall River, MA
"The Reading-Writing Connection"

The conference explores the connections between reading and writing and the critical and creative processes. For information, contact Deborah Lawton, Bristol Community College, 777 Elsbree St., Fall River, MA 02720. Phone: 508-678-2811, ext. 2259; e-mail: dlawton@bristol.mass.edu

The road to hell is paved with good intentions: The effects of mandatory writing center visits on student and tutor attitudes

As both composition teachers and writing center tutors, Robert and I are ardent zealots for one-to-one conferences in writing instruction. So confident are we in our faith that recently we sought to converge the two learning environments (classroom and writing center) into one writing process. Specifically, we tested the pedagogical value and practicality of class-wide mandatory writing center visits. Ours was definitely a baptism by fire experience!

In theory, the idea seems to have a lot going for it. As directors, tutors, teachers, and writers, we're all aware of how helpful a writing center visit can be for any writer at any stage of the process. However, we often have difficulty convincing students to take that initial leap of faith, that first step into the center—perhaps they don't feel comfortable showing their work to others, or maybe they just aren't sure what it is we *do* in there. If students are *required* to visit, though, we are afforded a prime conversion opportunity. Once they have consulted with the tutors, we hope these unbelievers will be transformed into enthusiastic advocates of the center, disciples who not only will return to work on other papers, but will also convince their skeptical friends to come along as well.

Another advantage of class-wide required visits is that this policy doesn't stigmatize the struggling writers in the class as can individual referrals. Suzanne Powers writes of how some English faculty still view writing centers as places where remedial students can work only on grammar, spelling, and punctuation: "Teachers send a damaging message when they conceive of and use the center as a last resort, engendering negative student attitudes in those they refer and discouraging its use by students who do not wish to identify themselves as remedial" (17). By requiring *all* of the students to visit the center, the instructor endorses what Powers refers to as a "newer paradigm," one that "focuses on the total writing process: strategies for invention and discovery, considerations of audience, multiple drafting and revision, and a consideration of writing as a way of learning" (17). In other words, required class-wide visits help reinforce the message that the writing center can benefit *all* writers, regardless of ability.

In spite of the theoretical advantages of these class-wide referrals, Gary Olson demonstrates how faculty negativism or insensitivity concerning the writing center can have a detrimental effect on both the tutor and student involved. "By not taking the center seriously," Olson says, "the professor fails to provide support to those students who most need it, and by revealing to the staff that he or she does not value their work, the teacher sends them a harmful message" (155). Often this negativism produces frustrated tutors, and students who are hostile, indifferent, or diffident (158-9). In order to achieve success through mandatory visits, Olson stresses that "[i]t is absolutely essential that faculty members exhibit concern for what the center is doing and *can* do" (156). Faculty should encourage students to visit the center (not threaten them with the possibility in a detention-like way), and offer them positive reinforcement when they do go (161).

When I first read Olson's article years ago, I was a graduate student and one of several volunteers who had started and was maintaining a fledgling writing center. As we struggled to attract both financial and faculty backing, I could relate to but remained skeptical of Olson's plea for committed faculty support of writing centers.

However, when I began teaching at Francis Marion University, I found myself surrounded by faculty who not only supported our Writing Center enthusiastically, but teachers who actually *tutored* in the Center, usually by request! I was stunned. Here was the dream faculty Olson envisioned years before. Surely if anyone could reap the potential benefits of class-wide visits to the writing center, they could!

During the Spring of 1995 (I was serving as Assistant Director of the FMU Writing Center), Robert told me he was going to require all of his freshman composition students to visit the Center for each of his assignments. Of course I was excited and intrigued by his plan to integrate the Center into his pedagogy. I'll let Robert explain how and why he chose this approach. . . .

Good intentions

My intention in making writing center visits a mandatory part of paper-writing was twofold. One, I wanted the students to gain more feedback (in addition to the peer-editing they did in class and the individual conferencing with me in and out of class), and two, I wanted to close a loop with my classroom pedagogy, which puts an emphasis on drafting and feedback.

When I first stipulated mandatory visits in the spring of 1995, I required my students to go the Writing Center for every paper they wrote. At the time the Center was open during the day and evening as well, so the idea of required visits seemed more feasible because of the extra hours available. Since I tutored in the Center, I knew intimately how it was set up and how

to best prepare my students. First, I prepped the class by taking them to the Center for an orientation tour and then by discussing (repeatedly) in the classroom what they needed to take with them to the Center and what they needed to do once they got there—that they were to direct and be engaged in the tutorial.

Then I prepped the Center by talking with our Center's Director and Barbara. I explained to them what I was doing, that the students were expected to get a tutorial for each paper they wrote, and that many students might wait until the last minute to go. I also talked to the student tutors and explained my plan again, emphasizing what to expect in tutorials. Throughout the semester I provided the Center with copies of all my paper assignment sheets, in case students forgot to bring theirs and to allow tutors to ask me questions directly.

Finally, during the course of the semester, I kept close tabs on my students' progress in and response to their tutorials. I talked to the student tutors often, discussing their consultations and any problems or praise they had concerning the students. I set up everything as responsibly and as thoroughly as I knew how.

The road to hell

But things did not go as smoothly as I had planned. As I talked with tutors during the semester, I found out a lot about student and tutor attitudes toward these mandatory Center visits. Several of my students, despite my repeated pleas to go early to avoid a mad rush, usually went to the Center at the last minute. One student wrote her papers in the hallway outside the Center before she went in for her tutorials.

Tutors told me several students were fidgety during the tutorial and just wanted to get it over with. Some were, according to one tutor, very "aggressive about ending the tutorial." Other student attitudes ranged from hostile to apathetic, such as "I have to be here.

Read this," thereby resisting all that the tutors and I were trying to do with these mandatory visits. The tutors also said some students did not pay attention to them, staring off into space or blankly at the tutor. And rarely did these students want to set the agenda of the tutorial.

The tutors also expressed their own attitudes toward these required tutorials. Although Beverly made a sincere effort to work with my students, their impatience was frustrating and made her want to rush through the tutorial as well; she felt as if the whole exercise was pointless. Since most of my students waited until the last minute, "traffic jams" routinely developed in the Center; Beverly said that working with a number of my disinterested students in a row negatively affected her interaction with students who really wanted to be there.

Jackie, another tutor who saw the bulk of my students, echoed Beverly's frustration with eleventh hour tutorials and "wasted time" that should have been spent working with committed students. Furthermore, as soon as she learned a student was mine, she immediately felt "on guard." (Indeed, several tutors told me they grew to dread seeing some of my students—and with these attitudes, who could blame them?)

However, even in the face of this kind of backlash, both Beverly and Jackie had positive things to say. They talked about those students of mine who came early and wanted to work, who paid attention, actually took notes and engaged in some kind of discussion about their writing. Not surprisingly, those tutorials were the most rewarding.

Even with this bit of positive response, in general my mandatory visits were not as successful as I had hoped. Were I to try again, I knew some changes would have to be made, particularly because we had lost our nighttime hours for the Center. This was

never clearer to me than in the fall of 1995 when, as a tutor in the Center, I witnessed the chaos first-hand when several professors required their students to go to the Center. There weren't enough tutors or time slots to fill the end-of-the-semester demand, and students were literally lined up and down the hall outside the Center.

The road well-traveled

These difficulties we've experienced with required visits are not restricted to the FMU campus, however. For those of you who regularly participate in the WCenter listserv, you may recall that Jim Bell raised this issue in November 1995, just before Thanksgiving vacation (a prime time for a student invasion of the writing center). As others jumped into the discussion, they explained how they've wrestled with some of the same problems that Robert mentioned. Jeanne Simpson talked about the student tendency to wait until the last minute to visit, and Jane Nelson added that "a good percentage of the writers who come under these conditions do not really want to be there." Nelson and Bell also emphasized how this situation can overburden and frustrate tutors.

In addition to these concerns, Bell discussed the problem of faculty ignorance concerning the function of the writing center—the professor he mentioned thought the center was more of a proofreading service. Bell also worried about the fact that his tutors had to turn other students away in order to accommodate the referred students.

Ironically, many of the same people who complained about the "forced march" (Muriel Harris' vivid description!) to the writing center also defended the practice and hesitated to ban it altogether. For example, Bell wants to "keep the valuable faculty support" of his writing center, even if initially misguided, and Simpson doesn't "want to say no to somebody who [thinks] the writing center [is] a good thing." Both Pete Carino and Beth Rapp Young view these sorts of

visits as educational opportunities, ways to showcase the center to students and faculty.

And, even after a punishing semester of angry students and exhausted tutors, we too have faith in the inherent value of required tutorials and are reluctant to give up on the idea. In fact, Robert spent the next year experimenting with and fine-tuning his technique.

Redemption

In fall 1995, I required my students to go to the Center for only their second and third papers, not for all of them as I did before. I thought reducing the number of mandatory visits would help lighten the Center's workload while still exposing the students to the services offered there. After they turned in the third paper, I had them write about their experience in the Center and whether they would go back now that they were no longer required. Overall their response was positive, and most said they probably would return on their own; however, very few visited again.

Thus in spring 1996, I tried yet another approach. I still required two visits, but the students could choose which two of the five class papers they'd take to the Center for help. Allowing them this freedom of choice worked very well; several students went for their mandatory tutorials early on and continued to visit throughout the semester, often a few times for each paper. I had never had such a response before, and for the first time I felt truly enlightened about what mandatory visits could do.

Keep the faith

Even though we realize that mandatory visits to the writing center will always pose formidable challenges, the benefits for student writers outweigh the drawbacks given that the visits are managed carefully. Here are some suggestions toward that end:

Communication. We cannot overemphasize the importance of communication between professors and the writing center director. Powers calls this a "partnership" between the professor and director. This partnership would include, as Simpson says, the professor letting the director know his or her plans for requiring mandatory visits. It would include as well the director keeping in touch with the professor about what the center does and doesn't do.

Orientation Visits. So that students will better understand how the center works and what will be expected from them during a tutorial, some type of orientation is helpful. The director can come to the classroom, and/or the class can take a field trip to the center.

Preparing Students. The professor can also help prepare his or her students for a tutorial. Young suggests spending class time developing questions for students to ask tutors. Similarly, one FMU professor requires her students to bring her comments (from past papers) to mandatory tutorials. In her comments she highlights problem areas that students may want to address during their visit. And Carol Haviland proposes "draft workshops" in which tutors come into the professor's classroom to work with students. One of her tutors likens this marketing strategy to "taste samples at the grocery store."

Group Appointments. Nelson suggests having students make small group appointments in the center as a way of handling more students in a smaller amount of time.

Center Calendars. Simpson suggests a calendar for the center where the director could keep track of the patterns of paper due dates and the like. Katie Fischer further suggests putting a wall calendar in the center where the faculty can record due dates and check the due dates of other faculty.

Appointment System. If the center has an appointment system, the professor can have students sign up for tutorials during class; this approach should help discourage "clumping" at peak times.

Of course following these guidelines will not necessarily solve the problems. There will always be the professor who requires his class to visit without warning, or the student who puts off her tutorial until the last minute. Ultimately, however, we believe the potential benefits outweigh the predictable drawbacks. After a year of revising our approach to mandatory visits, we're encouraged by a successful integration of discourse in the classroom with that of the writing center. As Milton points out in *Paradise Lost*, "long is the way / And hard, that out of hell leads up to light" (II.432-3). Amen!

Barbara Bell
Francis Marion University
Florence, SC
and
Robert Stutts
The South Carolina Governor's School
for Science and Mathematics
Florence, SC

Works Cited

Bell, Jim. "Marks for Visiting the Writing Center." 10 Nov. 1995. Online posting. WCenter. Internet. 15 Jan. 1996.

Carino, Pete. "Re: Marks for Visiting the Writing Center." 10 Nov. 1995. Online posting. WCenter. Internet. 15 Jan. 1996.

Harris, Muriel. "Re: Marks for Visiting the Writing Center." 11 Nov. 1995. Online posting. WCenter. Internet. 15 Jan. 1996.

Haviland, Carol. E-mail to the authors. 18 July 1996.

Nelson, Jane. "Re: Marks for Visiting the Writing Center." 10 Nov. 1995. Online posting. WCenter. Internet. 15 Jan. 1996.

Olson, Gary A. "The Problem of Attitudes in Writing Center Relation-

ships." *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration.* Ed. Gary Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984. 155-69.

Powers, Suzanne. "What Composition Teachers Need to Know About Writing Centers." *Freshman English News* 19 (1991): 15-21.

Simpson, Jeanne H. "Re: Marks for Visiting the Writing Center." 10 Nov. 1995. Online posting. WCenter. Internet. 15 Jan. 1996.

—. "Re: Marks for Visiting the Writing Center." 11 Nov. 1995. Online posting. WCenter. Internet. 15 Jan. 1996.

Young, Beth Rapp. "Re: Marks for Visiting the Writing Center." 10 Nov. 1995. Online posting. WCenter. Internet. 15 Jan. 1996.

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

Sept. 17-20: National Writing Centers Association/Rocky Mountain 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

Oct. 11: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in Salem, OR
Contact: Eleanor Berry, English Dept., Willamette U., 900 State St., Salem, OR 97301, e-mail: eberry@willamette.edu

Nov. 7-8: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Kansas City, MO
Contact:Shireen Carroll, Dept. of English, Davidson College, P.O.

Box 1719, Davidson, NC 28036. Phone: 704-892-2012; fax: 704-892-2005; e-mail: shcarroll@davidson.edu

April 3-4: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Youngstown, OH
Contact: Sherri Zander, Writing Center, One University Plaza, Youngstown State U., Youngstown, OH 44555. Phone: 330-742-3055; e-mail: sdzander@cc.ysu.edu

April 18: Mid-Atlantic Writing Center Association, in Largo, MD
Contact: Richard Profozich, Writing Dept., Prince George's Community College, Largo, MD 20774-2199. Phone: 301-322-0598; e-mail: rlp@pgstumail.pg.cc.md.us

A high school text advises students on using their writing lab

Patrick Sebranek, Verne Meyer, and Dave Kemper. *Write for College*. Wilmington, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. (Hard cover: $14.50; soft cover: $10.50. To order or for more information, contact Great Source Education Group, 181 Ballardvale Street, Wilmington, MA 01887. 1-800-289-4490; http://www.greatsource.com)

In a world where the role of writing centers in writing instruction is too often ignored or misrepresented, it's worth hoisting a champagne toast to the authors of a high school text that devotes a chapter of truly insightful advice on how to use a writing center. So, let's raise a glass to honor Patrick Sebranek, Verne Meyer, and Dave Kemper, the authors of *Write for College* (a text published by Write Source, part of the Great Source Educational Group, a Houghton Mifflin Company).

Write for College is a comprehensive handbook that, as the authors say in the introduction, "covers much more than writing. It also provides information and guidelines for speaking, thinking, test taking, studying, researching, and nearly every other topic essential to success in college." Surely, we can all think of some topics not covered in *Write for College* (how to finance your textbook purchases, how to cope

with an out-of-control roommate, etc.), but there is an impressive array of material packed into this book: writing processes, styles of writing, types of writing, research papers, documentation, electronic sources, reading and study skills, critical listening, writing to learn, test taking, vocabulary building, speaking skills, grammar and mechanics, and even an almanac of lists of holidays, weights and measures, parliamentary procedures, periodic table of elements, world maps, the U.S. Constitution, etc. It's almost 900 pages of non-stop useful information and advice.

Even if you are not shopping for a textbook for college-bound high school students, you might want to consider getting a copy to give as a graduation present for someone who will be heading for college. Or maybe you want your own copy so that you can draw from the chapter entitled "Using the Writing Center" as you explain your

center or lab. The chapter starts off with an explanation of how a writing lab works, with a fictional dialogue between a tutor and student, illustrating how a typical tutorial might proceed, what kinds of questions a tutor might ask, and what might be covered in the session. The authors acknowledge that some students may be reluctant to visit a writing center and then, proceeding by question and answer, deal with questions such as "Is the writing center just for 'remedial' writers?" "When should I take my paper to the writing center?" and so on. The answers are firmly rooted in writing center theory and pedagogy and are positive and pleasant in tone. There is even a list of "tips" for getting the most out of the writing center, and a page on OWLs (Online Writing Labs). Let's hope this is the first of a new genre of textbooks on writing that include a discussion of writing lab tutorials as a useful and integral part of a writer's growth.

TUTORS' COLUMN

The aches and pains of revision

Every writer knows that the revision process can change a paper from average to superior. Most beginning students, on the other hand, see revision merely as something teachers make them do; they don't view it as an opportunity to expand on what they wrote the first time. As far as the beginning writer is concerned, what they wrote down in their first draft is the best their writing can get; and when they are asked to revise, they look for places to add commas, check for incorrect spellings—but only the ones they will recognize without a dictionary—and look for places to add paragraph indentations. Most students, when they hear the word "revision," automatically think that if they stretch their papers for length their instructors will be happy.

When I was a new tutor in the Communications Skills Center (CSC) at East Texas State University, panic set in when I realized the responsibility I would have with students coming to me for help. I don't think I went to sleep for the first two weeks of the semester . . . I was too scared! One of the main points that the director of the CSC hammered into our brains during training was that tutors are not proofreaders or editors; our job is to point out problem areas in students' writing and teach the students how to catch and fix the problems themselves. Tutors ideally reinforce what students learn in the classroom. One area in which tutors can most effectively help is by reinforcing to students the importance of higher order concerns in writing which, according to Muriel Harris, are "thesis, tone, organization, and de-

velopment" (94), all to be developed in the revision process.

Helping students learn how to revise and look for the higher order concerns becomes one major responsibility tutors have. Tutors look for coherence, main ideas, and supporting details in students' writing. Where areas are unclear, we encourage students to give examples and to flesh out details so their writing leaves no questions in their readers' minds. We attempt to teach students how to "show" their audience what they, as authors, are trying to say. For beginning writers, this is a very difficult area. Beginning writers either assume their audience knows what they mean or don't think their audience wants to be bored with the little details. What they do not understand at that point is that the little details are what really bring a piece of writing to life.

As a tutor, I try to encourage students by picking out specific examples within their work to demonstrate their strong points as writers; one of the tutor's biggest jobs is to help students find areas where they could expand or be more specific in order to make their essays more clear, more interesting, and easier to follow. Our CSC director encourages verbal brainstorming with students to help them discover details they have left out of their writings. This often works; however, students frequently state they do not know how to write what they have just said or say they do not remember what they just said. Sometimes in this case tutors feel they have to feed the students back every word they just said to the tutors.

When I am caught in this position, I feel as though the students are only writing what I repeat to them because they think I have validated their idea as a worthwhile experience. Students often very willingly give away the ownership of their papers to the tutors. When this transfer of ownership takes place, I get an uncomfortable feeling because I know what is happening and cannot always stop it. Don Killgallon, in "Word Processing Without Computers: Demystifying the Revision Process," reinforces the notion that students must retain ownership of their papers; just because tutors suggest changes doesn't mean students must accept those suggestions and make the changes. Killgallon turns that ownership back to the individual students by encouraging students to evaluate their tutors' suggestions and choose whether to accept or reject the suggestions.

For example, Debbie had notes from her instructor to check for specific and sensory details in her essay. One line in which I suggested Debbie use more specific details read: "I would be deprived of my job." When I asked what she meant by "deprived," she stated that because of an injury she had sustained, she would be unable to do her job and would, therefore, lose it. I suggested she state that in her paper. Debbie insisted that the following sentences made that fact clear, and that she didn't want to change her statement. I went through the paragraph containing this sentence and showed her how each sentence connected to the next or explained what was to fol-

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

A case in point...

In my last column, I talked a bit about the issue of confidentiality in the writing center, how one center's conception of privileged information may not agree with another's and how these differences can affect the ethics of how a center reports on its activities to others. In my writing center at the University of Illinois, for example, we do not send reports on conferences to faculty. In many other centers around the country, sending out such report slips is the norm. Is my center more ethical than the others? Of course not. As I've discussed in previous columns, our respective administrative configurations are probably quite different, as are our instructional missions, pedagogical philosophies, and institutional histories. What serves for one center does not serve for all, and it seems to me that's just the way it should be.

But even centers with fairly clear policies about reporting (or not reporting) on conference sessions can be confronted with troublesome or unforeseen situations that may cause them to rethink those policies or, at least, consider modifying them for a particular case. I promised in the last column to tell you about such a "particular case" in my own writing center and try to characterize how—and why —it forced me to revisit my own policies about confidentiality. The incident began like this: Late one Tuesday morning, the Workshop's secretary called to tell me the center had suddenly found itself inundated with students from a single engineering class, all wanting to talk with consultants about a graded writing assignment that had just been returned to them by their instructor. My first thought was that the instructor was requiring his students to bring their papers into the cen-ter (a practice I generally discourage faculty from adopting), and I imagined myself making yet another phone call to explain why mandatory conferences are both unproductive for students and unmanageable for the writing center.

But it turned out that the situation was even more troublesome than I first thought. The students were blisteringly irate about the comments they received on their papers, and they all came into the writing center of their own volition, *en masse*. They believed the comments—and grades—on their papers were unfair, and they wanted the consultants to explain where they had gone wrong (if indeed they had) and what they could do to meet the instructor's expectations. Unfortunately, those requests proved singularly difficult to satisfy. My consultants, after looking at several papers, were unable to make much sense of the comments, and, in fact, many of them were upset about the way these papers had been evaluated and the kinds of commentary that appeared in the margins.

Apparently, there were two graders for each paper, the professor (who commented on content) and a TA (who commented on grammar and style). Each grader had assigned a numerical score for his respective component, and the two scores were tallied at the end of the paper for a final grade. While I have some strong objections to this method for evaluating written work, I didn't feel the practice itself was sufficiently troublesome to merit any kind of direct response on my part. Lots of instructors follow similar practices. What was disturbing, however, was the kind and quality of the commentary. In many cases, the gram-matical advice given was just plain wrong. Students were having points deducted for perfectly acceptable grammatical constructions and punctuation placement, and the tone of the commentary was uniformly rigid and condescending. Other comments in the margins—presumably from the instructor —were no less severe and equally confusing.

For example, the original assignment for these papers had asked students to read an article about a recent advancement in engineering—one that had both financial and ethical consequences for the engineering field at large—and to do two things with it. First, they were to summarize the focus and substance of the article, and then they were to provide a personal response to the ethical issue being raised. This is a fairly typical assignment for many classes, particularly WAC courses, and it's something that all of us see from time to time in our writing centers. There's an implied two-part structure for the written response, and it's usually fairly easy to work with students who are trying to construct their essays to fulfill the requirements of the assignment. For the students in this class, when it came time to write the "personal reaction" portion of the essay, they used introductory phrases such as "It seems to me that. . . . " or "I think that. . . . ." Just about what one would expect, right? But when their papers were returned to them, virtually every one of these phrases was circled in red, and the marginal commentary read "Who cares what *you* think?"

Now we're all used to seeing nasty instructor comments from time to time, but even in the worst cases we can usu-

ally find some germ of a rhetorical problem that the instructor is reacting to. That gives consultants the opportunity to assuage the student by downplaying the tone of the response and focusing on the problem that provoked it. But this case seemed to be different. The faculty member appeared to be attacking students for trying to meet one of the stated requirements on the assignment sheet—providing a "personal" reaction to something they had read.

In short, not only did the comments infuriate the students and annoy the consultants, but they offered no clue about how to "fix" the problem or why there was a problem at all. Everyone was stymied.

And everyone turned to me.

In my writing center, I believe very strongly in the principle of confidentiality, and I put that belief into effect in any number of administrative policies about what can and cannot go out of the center. I do not report to faculty members or anyone else about which students come into the center or what they talk about in conferences. If the students wish to share that information with their instructors, that is their right, but I want students to feel free to say anything they want in conferences without worrying about whether their words will later come back to haunt them. I don't let anyone other than consultants look at our student files, and I advise my consultants quite strongly not to tell stories about conferences and/or students outside the writing center. I also resist the urge to contact faculty members about problematic assignments, harsh grading policies, or abusive comments on student papers. I don't think that kind of instructor oversight is the business of the writing center, but my consultants *are* free to advise students of possible options and recourses, such as meeting with the instructor to get further clarification on an assignment or, in some cases, showing the comments to the offending instructor's department head.

That being said, however, this case seemed to make an argument for *my* contacting the instructor directly. The demeanor of the comments and the anger of the students we saw in the writing center made it unlikely that they would achieve any rapprochement if left to themselves. The TA, judging from what students had to say, was either unavailable or unapproachable, and the professor was too busy to spend much time with any of them. Further, my consultants were at a loss about how to *work* with the students from this class, because *they* could not understand what the students were doing wrong on the assignment. It seemed to me, then, that it was in the writing center's best interest for me to contact the instructor and get some advice. I was not particularly pleased by the prospect of making such a phone call; faculty members—quite understandably—often get defensive when I talk with them about their assignments or the ways they respond to student papers, so I felt I had to be quite diplomatic in my approach.

Fortunately, the professor was very receptive to my phone call and was genuinely interested in improving the writing of his students. He'd been through WAC training, and had learned a little about incorporating writing into his classes, so we had some common ground to work from. When I expressed my apprehension about contacting him to talk about the assignment we were having trouble with, he said, "Listen, as far as I'm concerned, the writing center can do no wrong," so that not only helped both of us feel a bit better about the mutual discomfort we were feeling, but it also convinced me that he was, deep down, a wise and perspicacious individual.

The phone call helped a lot. The professor ended by saying he would pay a bit more attention to his TA's grammatical comments, and that he would try to soften his own tone when responding to students. He had written what he did in the margins because he objected to the "unreasoning touchy-

feely" responses his students had made in their personal reaction sections. When students said what they "thought" in their papers, they usually expressed their *feelings* about the issue and failed to offer any clear evidence or argument in support. What *he* wanted in their personal response was a tightly organized and well-supported case to *prove* the merits of their own position. He agreed, at my suggestion, to send some model papers to the writing center that the consultants could read and help them understand how to work with his students in the future.

In this case, then, I felt that confusion over the *point* of the assignment and the inability of my consultants to figure out how to guide students in their responses was sufficient reason to overrule my usual policies about keeping writing center conferences completely confidential and not questioning instructor assignments or grading practices. I made the judgment that a greater good would be served by contacting the instructor than by refusing to do so, and this time—happily—it worked out for the best. I must admit that I'm not sure how I would feel now if the instructor had been angered by my call or complained that I was violating his academic freedom or berated me for my inability to understand an assignment that he felt was perfectly simple. As with many decisions that we make on the basis of ethical principles, there is always an element of risk involved, a possibility that others will not share our ethics to a degree that is sufficient for mutual accommodation and understanding. Perhaps in some future column I will find myself returning to the topic of confidentiality, reflecting on a similar situation that did not work out quite so amicably. I hope not, but I wouldn't be at all surprised.

Michael A. Pemberton
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Ballot: NWCA elections for at-large members

Dear Member of NWCA: We need to elect one secondary school representative and five at-large members of the NWCA Executive Board. The term is two years, to begin at the business meeting at NCTE in November. Please note that you must be a member of NWCA to vote. Please use the exact name you find on the newsletter when you cast your ballot, either by surface mail or e-mail. Candidates are listed here.   -Paula Gillespie, NWCA Secretary

Sonja Bagby: I am an M.A. English associate at the State University of West Georgia where I created and developed the new Writing Center last fall. I am faculty now, but I will move to an administrative position (same job, different name) as WAC is adopted by our College. I am starting Ph.D. studies in Comp/Rhet, and my other research interests are theater and theology. Our Center is a relaxed but busy place. My tutors work to promote our mission—to teach writers to "fish." We also strive to observe the Golden Rule. But to illustrate both principles, we encourage each other to write, write, write, and to publish and present papers.

Bob Barnett is the chair of the Michigan Writing Centers Association. He directs the Writing Center at the University of Michigan-Flint, where he is also a Composition specialist in the English Department. He is the Co-director of the University's Writing Across the Curriculum Program. He received his Ph.D. in Composition and Rhetoric from the University of Nevada, Reno. He has published articles in such journals as *The Writing Center Journal, Writing Lab Newsletter,* and *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, and is currently co-editing a collection of articles on the advancing role(s) of writing centers in WAC programs.

Beth Boquet is the director of the writing center and an assistant professor of English at Fairfield University in Fairfield, CT. She is currently serving as the president of the Northeast Writing Centers Association and has just completed a term as an at-large representative of NWCA. Her work has appeared in several edited collections as well as in *Composition Studies, The Writing Lab Newsletter*, and *The Writing Center Journal*. Her current research interests involve institutional histories of writing centers and the applications of critical theory to writing center work.

Darsie Bowden is the Director of University Writing Center at DePaul University in Chicago, where she previously served as director of First-Year Writing and as Director of Graduate Studies in Writing at the Naperville campus. Dr. Bowden received her Ph.D., with an emphasis in rhetoric and composition, from The University of Southern California. She has published in *Rhetoric Review, CCC,* and the *Writing Center Journal*, and is currently finishing a book on voice in writing that will be published by Boynton/Cook.

Deb Burns is an Assistant Professor and Writing Center Director at Merrimack College in Andover, MA. She has published in *Writing Center Journal* and has a forthcoming article in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and an essay in a collection on intellectual property. Deborah Burns is presently a representative-at-large in the National Writing Centers Association, and is an executive board member of the New England Alliance for Computers and Writing. She has presented papers at the National Writing Centers Conference, the Conference of College Composition and Communication, the New England Writing Centers Conference, the National Alliance for Computers and Writing Conference, the New England Alliance for Computers and Writing Conference, as well as the National Conference for Peer Tutoring in Writing.

Michael Dickel: I've worked in writing centers nearly every one of the ten years I've taught composition, including as director of the University of Minnesota Composition Program's center while a GTA. Last January I was hired back to direct the University of Minnesota writing center as professional staff. My teaching experience ranges from an urban research university to a rural liberal arts college to an open-enrollment state college. I assisted Lillian Bridwell-Bowles with the 1993 annual CCCC meeting and consulted with NCTE staff for 1994. I've presented papers at the Midwest Writing Centers Association, CCCCs, and the Wyoming English Conference.

Peter Gray: I am currently at Fairfield University. I was hired to work with second language students in our Writing Center and in the courses I teach in the first year writing program. I am writing my dissertation at the intersection of Rhetoric and Composition, poetics, and cultural studies. I was an undergraduate tutor, a graduate tutor, and now am a faculty tutor and have presented my work on writing centers across the country on issues including on-line tutoring, tutor talk, the uses of tutor journals, and writing center and classroom interaction. I am currently on the Northeast Writing Centers Association Steering Committee and hope to participate further on the national level.

Ghussan Greene: I am the Director of the Writing Center and WAC at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, SC. During thirteen years in the writing center business, I have developed three centers: one for a small private college, one for a large community college, and the computer-assisted

writing center that I direct now in a small state-aided university of 5,000. I believe the writing center is the major support for writers across the campus: students, faculty, and staff. And the most important element of the writing center is a cadre of trained graduate and undergraduate writing tutors. I am happy that the board is moving toward developing guidelines for accrediting writing centers and tutors, and I would like to be more involved in this endeavor during another term.

Carol Haviland: Asst. Prof. English, California State University-San Bernardino. Writing Center Director, WAC Coordinator. Teach basic writing and grad courses in comp/rhet. Primary interests: writing centers, WAC, basic writing, intellectual property, grad rhet/comp teaching. Big project right now is finishing our zillion-authored book "Writing Centers and Collaborative Pedagogy: Interrogating Our Own Enactments," which is enormously interesting and exhausting, but we think worthwhile. The work I do that is especially rewarding is including writing tutors in almost every conference presentation and article or book I do.

James A. Inman is Spencer Fellow at the University of Michigan, where he studies in the Ph.D. in English and Education program. He is a former Associate Writing Center Director and Technology Specialist at Valdosta State University and is co-editor of "Researching the Technological Center: Examining Technology Use in Writing Centers," an essay collection in development. Inman's publications have appeared in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, *Notes on Teaching English*, the *Journal of Technology Law and Policy*, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and *Kairos*.

Cindy Johanek: I started in writing centers as a peer tutor in 1986 (St. Cloud State University). Since then, I have directed Ball State's writing center for four years. I am currently part-time faculty at Ball State and Indiana-Purdue

at Fort Wayne (where I also tutor in IPFW's writing center), and I am writing my dissertation on composition research methodologies. I have served as a student representative on the MWCA board and as chair, vice-chair, program chair, and [currently] treasurer of the ECWCA board. My interests include undergraduate mentoring, basic writing, research methodologies, and cognition in cultural and gender studies.

Jeannette Jordan: No statement available.

Sara Kimball directs the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin, which she started in 1993. Her Ph.D. is from the University of Pennsylvania. Although her scholarly training is in Linguistics, she learned to love teaching composition at Rutgers Camden, where she taught from 1984 to 1987 and where she first encountered a writing center. Her scholarly interests include Indo-European linguistics, computer-mediated communication, and online writing centers. She is currently working on a dictionary of terms used in online communication and a study of literacy in the Hittite Empire.

Stephen Newmann: Stephen has tutored in the Mount St. Mary's writing center for more than 15 years and taught writing courses at colleges from Idaho to the Atlantic Ocean. He serves on the boards of the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association and the College English Association—Middle Atlantic Group. Stephen has worked with students with learning disabilities and with developmental writers and has enjoyed this work more than any other he has done. He has been involved with the National Writing Centers Association since its inception and has presented at both of its first two national conferences. He will present his findings concerning evaluating writing center tutors at the NWCA conference in Park City, Utah, in September 1997. He would be pleased to serve on the NWCA Board.

Robert A. Russell: I received my B.A. in English and History from East Tennessee State University in 1991 and my M.A. in English from the University of Tennessee in 1993. Since 1995 I've been the Director of the Computer-Assisted Writing Center at Virginia Intermont College in Bristol, VA; I will be assuming the directorship of the Writing and Communication Center at ETSU on August 18. My primary areas of interest in writing center studies include WAC and instructional technology applications.

Peter Sands: I am the Writing Center Coordinator at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and am also assisting in creation of a new WAC initiative there. Ph.D.: SUNY Binghamton; B.A. and M.A.: SUNY Albany. At Binghamton and the University of Maine at Presque Isle, I worked in WAC, trained TAs, and tutored students. I have been involved in computer-assisted writing and learning for 12 years; my current interest includes developing writing center pedagogy for online environments and broadening its use across the disciplines, especially in courses making use of emerging technologies. I currently am an Epiphany Project Leader, a member of the CCCC Committee on Computers in Composition, and serve on the boards of two journals.

Donna Sewell is Writing Center Director and Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Valdosta State University, where she teaches composition, tutor training, and advanced composition. Author of articles and book reviews in *Notes on Teaching English* and *Composition Chronicle*, she has presented academic papers at conferences of the National Council of Teachers of English, the Southeastern Writing Center Association, and the Georgia/South Carolina College English Association. She is co-editor of "Researching the Technological Center: Examining Technology Use in Writing Centers," an essay collection in development.

Bobbie Silk: As a nervous new graduate student in my mid-thirties, I saw tutoring as a job that supported becoming a "creative" writer. I re-see this now as my first interweaving of writing center necessities: creativity, love of writing, excitement in helping others, and compassion. My professional life includes degree work in language arts education at Oklahoma State, creative writing at Illinois State, dramatic literature at the University of Illinois. I am presently a member of the English faculty and co-director of the Writing Lab at Clarke College, Dubuque, Iowa. I hope to bring to the NWCA board a passion for cooperation and "re-seeing."

Jo Koster Tarvers directs the Writing Center at Winthrop University,

where she also teaches courses in business and professional writing, corporate communication, and early British literature. She received her Ph.D. from Chapel Hill in 1985, and has previously taught both at Chapel Hill and at Rutgers. She is also the former president of In*Scribe Communications, a corporate consulting and training firm, where she taught writing in corporate settings in the U.S. and England, directed a corporate writing center for Bell Labs, and worked in tutorial settings with writers from more than twenty countries. She is a member of the team drafting standards for accreditation of writing centers for NWCA. Most recent publication: *Teaching Writing: Theories, Practices, Scenarios* for Addison Wesley (1996).

Margaret Weaver has been Writing Center Director and Assistant Professor of English at Southwest Missouri State University for three years. She previously worked in TX writing centers for eight years. She has served the past three years on the Midwest Writing Centers Association Board and served as its representative to NWCA. During this time, Margaret reviewed proposals and assisted in the program preparation for the 1995 NWCA Conference and co-chaired the 1996 and 1997 MWCA conferences. She has published articles in WLN, JAC, and RTDE and has presented at NWCA, CCCC, and MWCA. Margaret desires to continue on the board because she values the collaborative and the exploratory spirit of NWCA members.

Please send your completed ballot to Paula Gillespie, Department of English, Marquette University, PO Box 1881, Milwaukee WI 53201-1881. If it is more convenient for you, you may cast an e-mail ballot. Simply send me your choices at gillespiep@vms.csd.mu.edu. **DEADLINE: October 1, 1997**

Feel free to make a photocopy of the following ballot and send the copy so that you don't have to cut up your newsletter.

— —

Your name and address [exactly as it appears on the *Newsletter* label]: _____

_____

_____

High School Representative (Please vote for one:)

_____ Jeannette Jordan

At-Large Representative (Please mark five choices:)

_____Sonja Bagby	_____ Ghussan Greene	_____Peter Sands
_____Robert Barnett	_____ Carol Haviland	_____Donna Sewell
_____Beth Boquet	_____ James Inman	_____Bobbie Silk
_____Darsie Bowden	_____Cindy Johanek	_____Jo Koster Tarvers
_____Deb Burns	_____ Sara Kimball	_____ Margaret Weaver
_____Michael Dickel	_____ Stephen Newmann	
_____Peter Gray	_____ Robert Russell	

Aches and pains of revision

low; however, when we came to the sentence containing "deprived," her paper's coherency was lost because she became general about something that should have been very specific.

Debbie still disagreed with me. I told her that since this was her essay, she could leave her paper just as it was; if she felt her idea was clear as it was, then by all means she should leave it alone and we would move on. We sat silently for a few minutes; then Debbie started noting some changes she could make to that one sentence and was delighted when she saw how those few changes brought coherence to the next sentence and finally to her whole paragraph. I had reinforced to her that she owned her paper and that the responsibility for it was entirely up to her; once she recognized her ownership, she felt comfortable and excited about making changes.

As my experience with tutoring increases, I am learning that after students state a good point I suggest they write it down; when they say they don't remember what they just said, I wait silently and eventually they come up with a similar thought expressed slightly differently, and usually better, than their original thought—just as Debbie did. Using this technique forces the students to take back ownership of their papers.

During the revision process with a student I try to get them to read out loud one paragraph at a time, find the main idea, then see how it connects to the next paragraph. If tutors do this out loud with students, students can see how the tutors spot areas which may require more detail and then they can start practicing this process themselves. Since our primary job as tutors is to teach students the skills they need to have a successful writing experience in college, and in life, it is important that they learn how to spot and fix ar-

eas within their own papers. As Muriel Harris states, a sorting system is required to help students look for "types, systems, or groups of errors so that they can get a handle on what to do about them" (94). Students need to eventually feel independent from their tutors; they will gain their independence as they develop the sorting systems they need to improve their writing.

Revision can take many forms beyond working with a tutor individually. In the lab, students revise on-screen or print out their documents and go over them at a table with a pencil or pen. My own revision process has included on-screen revisions, pencil revisions, reading aloud to catch areas which seem unclear or unconnected, as well as literally cutting and pasting when I can't seem to find what I'm after. The students in the lab, when revising at the table with a paper copy, are often uncertain about writing on their papers. As tutors sit with students, the students generally read the paper aloud to the tutor. In this way, students often find their own areas of incoherence and reorder as they go; however, in the process of reading their papers to the tutors, they often hesitate to make any notes to themselves about what to change or reorder when they get back to the computer. The tutors must encourage them to write on their papers so they don't forget what they were thinking of. I'm not sure why this happens but I can speculate that the students think if they write on their papers, then they *have* to make the changes; they can't just turn the paper in anyway. Also if the students write on their papers, they may end up with a paper covered with writing and that could be discouraging. They may see all the writing as negative reinforcement about how much they did wrong rather than as ways in which they are making their papers more interesting and easier to follow.

Once students are encouraged to make that first mark on their papers, they begin to make more notes—even when areas that might use some work are not pointed out to them. It's like getting that first spot on the new table cloth; you worry you are going to spill while you eat until someone spills for the first time, then you can relax and stop worrying and really enjoy the food!

An entirely different form of revision is proposed by Donald Murray, who describes his own writing process as "laying down a new layer of writing" over a layer that has previously been written (151). In Murray's book, *Write to Learn*, he includes a section entitled "Draft Layer by Layer" which demonstrates what he means by putting one layer on top of another. In reality what he is doing is writing multiple drafts of the same paper, and each time he is adding, clarifying, and rearranging details in order to get the meaning he most wants to convey.

Students who are taught Murray's layering system hopefully won't see the revision, or layering, process as something to be done in order to please the teacher. Instead, they may see layering as a process in which they are given latitude to draw out more details from their memories and include them in their work so their readers get the same view of the situation the author had when developing it.

One way Murray begins layering is to write about a subject for the first time: the first layer. Next, he gets a clean sheet of paper and writes about that same subject again but without re-reading the first draft. This is layering. In this way, the details are not duplicated verbatim and perhaps other details will sneak in, either intentionally or unintentionally, that the author had previously left out of the other layer.

Murray suggests that this clean-sheet layering, as I call it, continue. According to Murray, "there are no rules" (152); the clean-sheet layering process can take as many, or as few, attempts as necessary.

In my lab experience, I can see how using the clean-sheet layering method would be helpful. Students who are given their previous essays to revise are often stumped by their own words. They see what they have previously written; their meaning is still clear to them, so why should they revise? What they wanted to say the first time is already on the page. Perhaps more results or ideas may be seen if students were given an assignment, say write about your favorite person, on Monday, and turned in that assignment, and then on Wednesday were asked to write about that same person again, yet without their previous copy; the essays may be entirely different. They may have thought of additional or different details between Monday and Wednesday; those details may particularly enhance their writing on their subject.

My experiences in the CSC, both those that turned out well and those that didn't, have shown me that students really need to have control over their papers, no matter what style of layering or revision they use. If we, the tutors, are too interactive, the students begin to feel they no longer belong in their paper. They will back physically away from the paper and turn it entirely over to the tutor. Their arms will fold across their chests, their pencils will sit idly on the table, and their eyes will be roaming in other parts of the room. Who knows where their minds have gone?

Tracy P. Turner
Peer Tutor
East Texas State
Texarkana, TX

———————————

Works Cited

Harris, Muriel. *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*. Urbana: NCTE, 1986.

Killgallon, Don. "Word Processing Without Computers: Demystifying the Revision Process." *English Journal* 83.4 (1994): 79-83.

Murray, Donald M. *Write to Learn*. Ft. Worth: Harcourt, 1993.

THE *W*RITING LAB
N E W S L E T T E R

Muriel Harris, editor
Department of English
Purdue University
1356 Heavilon Hall
West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356

Forward & Address Correction