THE WRITING LAB

...FROM THE EDITOR...

As some of you who have written articles that appeared in the newsletter know, a request to reprint your article in collections published commercially means a royalty is paid by the commercial publisher. (Not something low-budget academic publications can afford. Sorry.) Lately, as Mary Jo Turley, our newsletter assistant, is finding out, more and more of the Tutors' Column essays are also being reprinted in books published commercially—complete with checks that roll in for those tutors too. We're delighted for those tutors and delighted that tutors' essays are increasingly being recognized as professional contributions to the literature of our field!

Yet another indication of the professionalization of our field is the notice on page 15 of the various activities of the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA). We have publications, awards, grants, meetings, the NWCA press, and a Web site, and efforts are underway to create an accreditation process as well as to form a European regional group, thereby internalizing our organization. Impressive!

Muriel Harris, editor

...INSIDE...

The rhetoric of written response to student drafts

Several years ago, *The Writing Lab Newsletter* carried a number of articles on OWLing, or on-line writing labs. The articles explored some of the ethical, rhetorical, and practical questions raised by the practice of writing responses to student drafts (Coogan, Crump, Jordan-Henley and Maid, Spooner). I don't by any means intend to dismiss this conversation, because it raised serious ethical and pedagogical issues that all of us in writing centers will have to face sooner or later, as computers become more and more prevalent. My starting point is different, however. I want to begin by taking written response as a fact, in the literal sense that it is something we do, something we are heavily involved in. I want to take up the issue of how we deal with written response, and how it affects the training program for our writing center.

We are heavily involved because we have run an OWL (which we call writing@quartz after part of our e-mail address) for over three years. Business has been light but is starting to grow. But more than that, we have been piloting a project similar to the "writing

fellows" programs at some other universities, which we call The Write Project.

Writing fellows programs are not common, and they are rarely connected with writing centers. Briefly, a writing fellows program assigns fellows (students who have been awarded fellowships, are trained in written response, and receive stipends) to classes in various disciplines. Students submit drafts of their papers, the fellows read them and write suggestions for revision, and

then the students revise the drafts and submit them to the instructor for grading. Brown University pioneered the program over a dozen years ago. In our region, Brigham Young, Utah State, and Western Washington universities now have thriving programs, and Idaho State has one in the pilot stage. At BSU, The Write Project involves all the Writing Assistants, each of whom responds to about 40 student drafts each semester.

I use the term "written response" to cover both online and Write Project responses, because they are essentially similar. There are differences in the ways drafts are received and responses delivered, of course, and it's true that written response in The Write Project takes place in a context different from the OWL. The project is structured so that it entails repeated communication with the instructors taking part in the project, requires students to submit drafts, and allows for optional writing center conferences about the returned drafts. The OWL is run by e-mail (we do not at this time use a MOO for real-time dialog as described by Jordan-Henry and Maid), and the writers seldom meet the Writing Assistants who respond to their drafts. But those differences aside, the rhetorical considerations in responding to the drafts are essentially the same.

In an early version of this article, I used the term "distant response" instead of "written response," until it dawned on me that *distant* carried the negative connotation of alienation between writer and responder. I decided not to throw it out completely (hence this paragraph), because truly there is a *distance* between the writer and the responder in written response; they are not meeting face-to-face. And this is a distance we must try to bridge, without becoming too directive or "fixing" people's drafts for them.

We try always to foreground the idea that what we are about is rhetoric. The writers who consult with us, either face-to-face or through written response, are engaged in problems of rhetoric in the papers they are writing. In the simplest definition of rhetoric, they are writing *about* a certain subject, *to* a certain audience, *for* a certain purpose. When we tutor or write responses to drafts, we face rhetorical problems, too. We adjust our tutoring style to the writer, the draft, and the assignment, and we certainly make use of *kairos*, the opportune moment: we must make quick decisions about what approach will be effective with this person facing these difficulties writing in this situation. Kairos is more applicable in face-to-face tutoring, but it applies to written response also, as we adjust our style of response to what a particular writer might understand and accept, given the clues in the draft and the "cover" message the writer includes with it. (I described part of our training in rhetorical analysis in a previous *WLN* article.)

We think about the tutoring/responding situation in rhetorical terms because it is a good way (though certainly not the only way) to raise our awareness of the complex issues at play in written response. It gives us a way of thinking about how to fulfill our two main obligations: to inform the writer of what the draft does well and what work it needs; and to respond in such a way that the writer will want to keep working on it.

We use the "rhetorical triangle" of dynamic relationships among writer, subject, and audience as a heuristic to guide our response style. Seen from the Writing Assistant's point of view, the rhetorical triangle takes on a new configuration. The Writing Assistant becomes the writer, the author of the draft becomes the audience, and the draft itself becomes the subject. The Writing Assistant asks her/himself questions like the following, based on the three-way relationships:

- **Writing Assistant-to-draft relationship:** How do I keep from overwhelming or confus-

ing the author with my responses? What kind of feedback and wording will the author understand without writing back for more explanation (or, more likely, just ignoring the comments)?

• **Writing Assistant-to-author relationship:** How am I representing our OWL as a credible authority? How do I respond as a sympathetic reader? How am I inventing the author as audience?

• **Author-to-draft relationship:** How can I respond so that the author might persuade her/himself about what the draft needs? How can I respond so that the author will still like the draft and want to keep working on it?

In writing fellows programs, the fellows are usually trained in courses that are separate and distinct from tutor-training courses, although there is considerable overlap in the curriculum. Since our Writing Assistants train for both roles at the same time, we fit all the training into one course. For the most part, I believe this is more advantageous than not. The training the WAs receive in analyzing and composing written responses to drafts carries over to their tutoring, where they are better prepared to understand what a paper is trying to do and to ask productive questions about it.

In the training course, we read selections on written response to student writing by Sommers, Podis and Podis, Straub, and Lindemann (220-237). We read them in that order because they build upon each other. We also practice some of the response formats collected by Elbow and Belanoff, particularly "pointing and center of gravity," "summary and sayback, "what is almost said," "movies of the reader's mind," and "descriptive outline." We study sample student drafts and write

practice responses. We have also developed a set of guidelines that we use as a checklist while framing our written responses.

An issue we have not fully resolved in The Write Project is time management. It is a potential issue with the OWL, too, assuming our clientele keeps growing. We have discovered what all writing teachers discover: reading a set of papers can be extremely time-consuming. Writing Assistants have to set aside their own work and make other sacrifices in order to return the drafts in time. We follow the principle established by other writing fellows programs that each Writing Assistant reads no more than twenty papers and usually only two sets of papers for the semester, but setting these limits on the workload isn't enough to prevent the time crunch. We are working on strategies (in particular, the second strategy in the guidelines below) to speed up reading the drafts while not sacrificing quality in our responses.

As might be expected, we receive some drafts that have such problems that we can find no way to respond helpfully in writing. This happens both online and in The Write Project. On these drafts, we tell the writers they have encountered writing difficulties that need one-to-one consultation, and we urge them to call for an appointment.

I will conclude by presenting the guidelines as they exist at the moment (they have continually evolved over the months as we have gained experience). The first two categories are based on Reigstad and McAndrew's division of writing into higher-order and lower-order concerns. But we found early on that a third category — response style — was equally important. The guidelines are written in terms of OWLing, but except for a few procedural details they apply to The Write Project as well.

Guidelines for written response
Responding to drafts in writing is more sensitive in some ways than one-

to-one tutoring. Try to respond in such a way that the writer will *like* the draft and *want* to work on revision.

Higher-order concerns
Note the assignment. Make sure you read the paper in light of what the writer is supposed to be doing. If the writer doesn't identify the assignment, and you can't tell what it is from reading the draft, send a message back (not including the original message) asking the writer to explain. Or call the writer on the phone.

Get a sense of the whole draft. Read the introduction and conclusion, to find out where the paper is going and where it gets to. Look at each body paragraph for a topic or theme statement. What is the writer trying to do overall (audience and purpose)? How does that square with the assignment? Doing this first will save you having to go back and change comments that you find later are wrong.

Try descriptive outlining, or "does/says analysis," when you can't quite put your finger on a problem. You can ask, "What is this paragraph doing?" (role in the paper) and "What is this paragraph saying?" (summary of topic) when paragraphs are not clear. If a paragraph is underdeveloped or confusing, direct the writer's attention to another paragraph in the draft that is clear and well developed, and suggest that the writer try treating the problem paragraph in a similar way.

Write interlinear comments at points where you feel something needs to be said right at that point and not at the end. But be careful not to insert too many comments, or the writer will get confused.

*End with a comprehensive summary of strengths and weakness, plus a note of encouragemen*t. This is your chance to prompt the writer to action. The following three-part format is adapted from Lindemann's suggestions:
    a. Devote at least one full sentence

to commending what you can legitimately praise; avoid undercutting the praise with *but* ("I like your introduction, *but* the paper is disorganized)."

    b. Identify one or two problems and explain why they make understanding the piece difficult.

    c. Suggest a goal for the student to work toward in the revision. (Lindemann 235)

Lower-order concerns

If there are several mechanical problems or awkward sentences, mark up a paragraph as a sample to show the writer where the problems are and to suggest corrections. Tell the writer that the rest of the draft needs similar editing. You might even want to rewrite the paragraph on separate lines. Be careful, though, not to delete any part of the draft, because if you do, the writer won't know what was wrong in the first place.

Response style

Keep the tone positive and encouraging. Find *specific* positive things to say. When you find something good, comment on it right where you find it, and also refer to it in your general note at the end.

Keep the language literal. Avoid metaphoric language, including clichés. Metaphors and clichés can easily be misunderstood. Even an obvious one like "You really hit the nail on the head here" is uninformative. What literally corresponds in the writing to the nail? to the head? to hitting? If the writer is ESL, your meaning might be totally obscure.

Avoid sarcasm, of course, but also avoid humor. Humor is encouraged in one-to-one tutoring, but you can't use it when the writer isn't sitting there beside you, interacting directly. Even the most innocent humorous comment can be misunderstood as mocking or sarcastic (Ryan and Hauck).

Respond in the first person. This is the magic trick that gives you the voice of a real reader and helps you keep the tone positive.

Address the writer by name and give your name, so that the writer will feel an actual human being has read and responded to the draft. Invite further questions and feedback on your response. Invite the writer to use writing@quartz again.

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WLN Online Index

The *Writing Lab Newsletter* now has an online index to past volumes. It is still under construction, but the page will help you find articles that may be of interest. The major headings are "subjects," and the minor ones are "subtopics." Only 300 of the 1100+ articles have cross references, so you'll be concerned mainly with "subject 1" and "subtopic 1."

The index can be accessed directly: http://owl.english.purdue.edu:591/ (or through the newsletter Web page: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/Files/ newsletter.html).

A paper copy of the index is available for $12. Back articles and back issues are also available. We are willing to quote discounts for more than five articles/issues or more than one volume (of ten yearly issues) shipped together.

For further information, please contact Mary Jo Turley, *WLN* Assistant: mjturley@purdue.edu (or) 765-494-7268; fax: 765-494-3780.

Electronic mail and the writing center

Many writing centers have established complex web sites with elaborate "pages" requiring the support of special computer systems and technically skilled staff. Creation of such on-line labs may appear too costly and involved for smaller writing centers on tight budgets, an apprehension not fully justified. Simple electronic mail, designed for home use, is inexpensive and needs little equipment and support, and offers the small center a feasible way to expand services. The only requirements to support electronic mail are a personal computer system, a modem, and a subscription to an on-line service that provides unlimited access for a few dollars a month.

Although offering tutorial and other services through e-mail is feasible for most writing centers, the advantages and problems of doing so demand consideration. The chief advantages of this technology are that it can extend both the hours and the "geographic" accessibility of a writing center, and it may cut costs. Because anyone anywhere with the proper information and a personal computer can open the center's electronic account, a tutor can work at home, periodically checking the e-mail for queries. Similarly, a student—away from the lab—who did not expect to need assistance, can get tutoring conveniently when it is necessary. Neither the tutor nor the student is using institutional facilities, which can be expensive to buy, operate, and maintain. Thus, a center with electronic mail is no longer a place with set working hours. It has become more convenient for its clients and staff.

Other advantages include the ready availability of writing exercises, reference works, journals, instructional handouts, library catalogs, and specialized discussion groups on the "net." Students may also visit nearly two hundred electronic writing centers listed on-line, taking advantage of the tutorial services they might offer "outsiders," as well as instructional materials and connections to other useful sites (Pegg). The use of electronic mail is widespread in the "real" world, and students who rely on it to contact the writing center learn a viable communications medium. Because they must write their questions and requests for assistance, students get additional practice in the skill they are attempting to improve.

A writing center can keep lists of students who seek assistance through electronic mail and send them routine academic and administrative communications. E-mail may also help in establishing electronic study groups for these clients. If instructors have mail accounts, they too can join important out-of-class tutorial conversations. The limitations of this communications tool are mostly in the imaginations of those who use it. Electronic mail may cut operating costs if tutors receive a modest stipend for checking the mail at set intervals when the center is closed. They would earn their normal, higher pay for the time they serve clients. Since only one student at a time can call over the single telephone line, just one tutor can cover each after-hours shift. Thus the hours of the center increase but cost less than conventional operation does. When the center is open, the tutors on duty will monitor the electronic mail for queries.

Dave Coogan has suggested another advantage of using e-mail to conduct tutorials. He notes that face-to-face tutoring involves much talk not directly related to the essay in question. The student may want to explain why he or she came to the center or to discuss the importance of the theme or to complain about the assignment or its probable reception by the instructor. Some of this talk can be helpful, but much of it is off-task. It also may be difficult for a tutor to give a longer paper careful attention if he or she must read it in the presence of an impatient student.

E-mail exchanges remove problems of this type. The tutor—like an instructor—receives a written document without conversational context. He or she can take the time necessary to examine it and to compose a thoughtful response or to request additional information. The client can read this response and digest it in private. If the response raises questions, they too can be formulated outside the pressures of conversation. In short, e-mail provides an opportunity to think that may improve both sides of the tutorial dialogue. Another advantage of using e-mail is that it puts the discussion of the writing on a more general level. That is, the tutor reads the whole paper and prepares a written response. Because the paper has become a subject of discussion instead of an object to be tinkered with, the tutorial has moved out of the simple "fix-up" mode (Coogan).

Offering electronic tutoring is a public relations activity for the writing center. By advertising the service, the center promotes itself. Depending on the nature of its electronic presence, it also may increase its visibility among the general community of computer users as well as with its target clients. The availability of the electronic writing center might be a recruitment tool that attracts students and assures parents, high school guidance counselors and English teachers. Nonetheless,

electronic mail also offers problems. A fundamental issue is whether a body of tutors and clients with the equipment and skill to put such a system to use is present. Many universities now require their students to buy and operate personal computers. Commuter institutions catering to non-traditional, first-generation college students often do not. It is beyond the scope of any writing center to create a community of computer users.

Another consideration is the selection of reliable tutors who can monitor after-hours mail by using personal computers in their homes. These people must keep their work logs, check the electronic mailbox on some predetermined schedule, and conduct their tutorial duties without supervision. In some institutions, tutors meeting these requirements may be scarce. Without them, the system cannot work. Use of an e-mail based writing center means that students attempting to improve their writing must simultaneously exercise computing and keyboarding skills, making the whole task more complex. Often the students deficient in one area have difficulties in the others. For these clients, the medium complicates an already difficult task. During the regular hours of the writing center, e-mail and walk-in users may have to compete for the attention of tutors. The center must establish rules of operation that encourage both groups, but at times these plans may fail because of heavy demand.

Stuart Blythe has identified several other problems that arise with all species of on-line writing labs, not just those run by electronic mail. Because it is technically more difficult to submit an entire essay than it is to ask a short question, the writing center may become an electronic grammar booth. Most writing centers prefer to "fix" students, not papers. Another issue is that writing centers often promote themselves as learning environments that do not threaten students. The technology itself may frighten clients. A

third problem is that some tutors rely in part on such cues as facial expressions and tone of voice in assisting students. Keyboarded communication masks these cues, although others like writing in all caps or having an unusual user name may replace them. Finally, Blythe notes that administrators might see the efficiencies of the electronic lab as an excuse for cutting the resources needed in the "real" center. In other words, if the center can serve its clients with a computer and an e-mail account, why provide anything else? If students can find electronic aids on other campuses, why replicate them here (Blythe)?

This discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of using e-mail for writing tutorials contains contradictions. The electronic environment is threatening, but it is private and thoughtful. E-mail may either encourage or discourage the "fix-it-shop" mentality. It extends the hours and geographic availability of the center, yet it limits access to those with the appropriate equipment, self-assurance, and technical expertise. Reciting this litany suggests a truism that has been applied to many technological advances in the past. It is not the nature of a device but its use that determines its worth. E-mail may help or obstruct the writing tutor's work depending on how prudently he or she handles the tool.

One issue related to this handling is what proportion of a writing center's services should it deliver through e-mail? Because so many clients currently lack the wherewithal to take advantage of electronic tutoring, it should not replace the "traditional" delivery of tutorial help. But because it can economically extend the reach and hours of a small writing center, it ought to be a part of the repertoire. Determining the size of this component depends on the computer literacy of tutors and clients, the type of instruction they prefer, as well as the equipment and funding of the center. When the service is ad-

vertised, its users will surface. Tutorial support can then be adjusted to fit the demand. If too few users call to justify maintaining the service, the cost of establishing the e-mail connection through a commercial provider is small enough that even a failed experiment causes little budgetary damage.

E-mail, for delivering the services of a writing center, is an imperfect but viable tool. Because the risk of trying it and the cost of using it are low, it merits serious consideration in writing centers looking for ways to extend support with limited staff and money. Because it offers new means of viewing, handling, and discussing papers, it can introduce fresh tutoring methods. Writing centers should consider it to add hours, visibility, reach, and instructional freshness to the services they provide.

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Writing Instructor
Washington College
Writing Center

Washington College, a liberal arts institution on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, invites applications for a full-time professional position as instructor of writing in its Writing Center. Primary responsibilities include providing individual writing instruction and response to students and other members of the academic community, as well as serving as a resource for faculty wishing to integrate writing into their courses.

Qualifications: at least a Masters degree, preferably in English or Rhetoric & Composition, with experience in the teaching of writing; expertise in both writing and teaching; a sound knowledge of writing theory and practice; computer experience. Knowledge of electronic teaching methods, such as OWLs, strongly preferred.

This is a full-time position based on a 9-month contract renewable annually, beginning in August of 1998. Application letter, vita, copy of transcripts, and three letters of reference should be sent to Geraldine Fisher, Director, Washington College, Writing Center, 300 Washington Avenue, Chestertown, MD 21620, gerry.fisher@washcoll.edu (410) 778-7263. AA/EOE

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

April 2-4: Texas Association of Writing Centers, in San Antonio, TX
Contact: Lady Falls Brown, 213 English Dept., Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-3091; e-mail: ykflb@ttacs1.ttu.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

April 23-25: South East Writing Center Association, in Macon, GA
Contact: Peggy Ellington, Wesleyan College, 4760 Forsyth Road, PO Box 8463, Macon, GA 31210-4462. E-mail: peggy_ellington @post.wesleyan-college.edu; phone: 912-757-3904; fax 912-757-4027.

May 8-9: 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

Oct. 8-10: Rockey Mountain Writing Centers Association, in Salt Lake City, UT
Contact: Jane Nelson, U. of Wyoming Writing Center, Center for Teaching Excellence, Coe Library, Laramie, WY 828071. E-mail: jnelson@uwyo.edu; phone: 307-766-5004; fax: 307-766-4822

Oct. 23-24: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Milwaukee, WI
Contact: Allison James, Hawley Academic Resource Center, Simpson College, 701 North C St., Indianola, IA 50125. Phone: 515-961-1524; fax: 515-961-1363; e-mail: james@storm.simpson.edu

Writing Across the Curriculum

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TUTORS' COLUMN

From the linguistic adaptation to the formation of a new mentality: A non-native speaker's account of internship at the writing center

It is quite natural for me—a non-native English speaker—to have a ponderous concern about whether I could communicate like a native-speaker when I work as an intern in the Texas Tech University Writing Center. I am fairly confident of my English writing skills; I taught English composition in Hunan University, located in Changsha in the southern part of China; I have experience with intensive English writing while taking graduate courses and experience of writing occasionally for publications and conference presentations in America. Yet I am not sure of my spoken English; its flaws could give me away and lead to a sense of embarrassment and loss of authority as a tutor in the writing center. When downloading the submissions and comments from on-line tutorials on the first day of the internship, I thought: "I need to familiarize myself with the language of you tutors; otherwise my style will surely sound stiff." When a veteran tutor asked what I thought of tutoring in the writing center a couple of days after I began to observe, I replied: "Your utterances are new to me."

For the purpose of imitation or out of the fear of losing trust on the side of students coming as clients, I took down every sentence, phrase and utterance of the native tutors that I thought I was unable to produce. I found that I would say: "You'd better expand. . . .," or "It is better for you to expand. . . . ," where a native tutor was saying: "You might need to elaborate. . . . "; I would say: "My general points are. . . . ," where a native tutor was saying: "The main things I recommend are. . . . "; I would say: "My understanding of this part is. . . .," where a native tutor was saying: "What I see basically here is. . . ."

A week's break following the first summer semester put my hectic efforts of linguistic adaptation to a rest. In meditation and introspection, I asked myself: "Are my efforts of linguistic adaptation successful?" I still hear my tutoring utterances sound like my former self, though with some change; I find that to communicate like a native-speaker throughout a session of tutoring is far more difficult than I had expected. In thinking through the problem with my linguistic adaptation, I have found that the effective oral expressions of those veteran tutors issue from a mentality that understands the students' needs and the contexts and aims of the writing center, and that willingly and skillfully operates in the writing center to help students coming in as clients in search of solutions to the various writing problems they face. Actually I have been over-conscious in the linguistic discrepancies between my spoken English and that of the native tutors to the extent that I have been often blind to what is behind their oral effectiveness.

The very nature of the writing centers here in America requires a working mentality that is so different from what I was familiar with in China. Working as an English teacher in China, I had never worried about what students' needs were because I basically determined their needs, and I had never worried about the possible judgment a student would pass on me after I made comments on his or her writing assignments. All was concentrated on the text: I did not need to bother about students' needs; I was seldom supposed to be mindful of other instructors' ideas of writing; I was inattentive at all to the students' body language. All I did was to comment on the discrepancies between the students' text and my understanding of good writing.

A tutor in the writing center here, unlike a teacher in my culture who *directs* purely according to his or her own knowledge of composition, is expected to *help* according to needs of students and course instructors. To *help* as writing tutor is requiring me to form a new mentality that is simultaneously alert to different aims to be achieved at the writing center. My efforts to think straight my performance in the writing center has revealed to me that the formation of a new working mentality is essential to both linguistic adaptation and professional learning.

To say that my previous emphasis on linguistic adaptation during the internship is an impasse might be an overstatement. But it is certainly inefficient and sometimes even misleading. With the realization that the focus of learning in the internship should be on the formation of a new working mentality, I have begun to pay most of my attention to how to communicate with students to understand their needs and intentions, how to convince them of their weaknesses in writing, and how to interact with them in establishing a rapport conducive to the joint efforts to find solutions to problems. Not only is the formation of a new working mentality constructive to picking up language, but also it brings me back to the essentials of the internship at the writing center.

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Reporting writing center sessions to faculty: Pedagogical and ethical considerations

My story begins in a writing center. The only distinguishing characteristic you need to know about this writing center is that its tutors prepare reports after each session with student clients and then send copies of these reports to the students' instructors. This writing center is about to close shop. Before leaving, the tutors with closing duty gather the day's stack of tutoring session reports and put them into envelopes addressed to the teachers whose students have used the center's services that day.

Now let's jump a day or two ahead in time to the receipt and opening of some of these envelopes. The names I'll ascribe to these envelopes' recipients will be fictitious, but their responses will be based on actual responses I have observed firsthand or intuited from reading of the experience of other writing center personnel.

Dr. Adams, who is teaching a freshman composition course, receives two session reports. Good, she thinks, as she looks at them, realizing that Jason and Shelby had indeed taken her advice to visit the writing center when they worked on their personal narratives. Both had told her that they didn't think they were very good at writing, but that they wanted to improve. A few doors down the hall, Dr. Adams' colleague Dr. Brown drops an unwieldy stack of incoming mail on the chair just inside his office. There is no room on his desk for any more piles. He's already two minutes late for class, but he shuffles through the stack to see whether it includes anything he needs to deal with immediately. He determines there are three essential pieces

and places these inside his grade book to examine in the few minutes he will have after class before the faculty council meeting begins. Among the items he leaves stacked on the chair, unlikely to be opened throughout the semester, is the envelope from the writing center. He can tell by looking that it contains a tutoring session report. Nothing he needs to act upon.

In another office a floor below Dr. Brown, Dr. Collins takes three writing center session reports from her envelope. She reads through them carefully, making a mental note to tell the three students she appreciates their extra effort. She also adds a note to her class plan to talk more about how she wants students to organize their papers; the reports had indicated that all three students were unsure about how to arrange their findings. Across campus from Dr. Collins' office, Dr. Duke arranges the seven session reports he has received, then inserts an asterisk beside the seven students' names in his grade book. These asterisks represent "extra credit" to Dr. Duke, and he takes them seriously into account when he computes his final course grades. A few doors down the hall from Dr. Duke, Dr. Edwards opens her envelope from the writing center. She attempts to read the description of the session written by the tutor. It is incomprehensible. She notes that the tutor who signed this report is a student in her graduate seminar.

Several buildings away from Dr. Edwards, Dr. Farmer opens his envelope and reads the enclosed report. So, he thinks, that Troy who always sits in the front row and participates so well

in class—he's got writing problems. Dr. Farmer would never have guessed. Two floors above Dr. Farmer, Dr. Gates examines the three session reports she has received. Like Dr. Duke, Dr. Gates pencils asterisks in her grade book beside the names of the students for whom she's received reports. The asterisks will remind her, when she computes final grades at the end of the semester, that these students received outside help on their papers.

In the office across from Dr. Gates, one more teacher, Dr. Howard, opens his envelope. According to the session report, Susan, a senior, went to the writing center to get help with documenting her term paper. Dr. Howard sighs. He had clearly told his students that the reason he was not covering the APA manual in class was because he wanted them to learn it on their own. He is disappointed in Susan; by this time in her academic career, he thinks, she should be able to take personal responsibility for her work. He puts the report into his file basket and looks at his "to-do" list for the day. At the top is a reminder to write a recommendation letter to accompany Susan's graduate school applications.

Surely I have made my point by now. When writing center personnel routinely send tutoring session reports to the teachers of their clients, they have no way of knowing what use, if any, teachers will make of the information that's conveyed. Even if my various scenarios are exaggerated, and even if a writing center's director has worked hard to convey the message that writing centers serve both experienced and inexperienced writers, and

that the tutors never actually do any of the writing that takes place on clients' papers, the fact still remains that writing center session reports are bound to be received in different ways by different teachers.

For me this unpredictable inevitability brings the practice of routinely sending session reports to teachers into the realm of ethics. I know there are other writing center administrators who feel as I do; I am simultaneously aware that others feel quite differently. In a recent *Writing Lab Newsletter* column, Michael Pemberton identifies two kinds of writing center people: "sharers" and "seclusionists." Sharers, as Pemberton describes them, feel that it is "perfectly acceptable to share information with faculty, to certify that students attended sessions in the center, to send reports to instructors that explain what was covered in conferences, to work with faculty members to track the progress of individual students, and to support one another's efforts through the free exchange of information." Seclusionists, on the other hand, believe the center "should be viewed as an entity entirely separate from classrooms and that faculty should not be privy to the substance of tutor/student discussions" (13).

According to Pemberton's descriptions, I am definitely a seclusionist. That is, my idea of a writing center is that it exists primarily for the benefit of students, not as a service site for teachers. Seclusionists like me tend to envision their centers, again quoting Pemberton, as

> "a kind of refuge where students (can) talk about their writing problems freely, without concern that reports of their weaknesses and/or insecurities (will) go beyond the boundaries of the conference itself" (13). In addition, we see our writing centers as a place on campus where students [can] get the "personal touch" in instruction . . . . It [is] a place where students

[can] feel safe, secure, and warmly treated, a place where they [can] talk to tutors who place . . . students' needs first, a place where they [can] say anything they [want] about the instructor or the assignment or their developing texts or their writing anxieties and not have to worry about that information being passed along to others. The writing center protect[s] student privacy, safeguard[s] student rights, and [gives] students individual attention while helping them with their writing. (14)

While "seclusionist" is a term that implies a more insular notion of the writing center than I want to convey on my own campus, I do believe most of us who fit into Pemberton's seclusionist category envision our writing centers as psychologically and politically distinct from the classroom. We feel that such a distinction is necessary and healthy, perhaps with the same rationale Dave Healy posits:

> . . . [S]tudents need people and places in their academic lives that are free from the stigma of grades and from an atmosphere of obligation. While grades may continue to motivate most of a student's academic behavior—including the decision to visit a writing center—being able to talk about and work on assignments with people who have no grade-giving power (or interest) is important in helping students develop intrinsic motivations for their studies. (23)

A writing center tutor seems to be in an ideal position to be the kind of resource Healy describes. Marilyn Cooper, in fact, argues that "the role of the tutor should be to create useful knowledge about writing in college and to empower students as writers who also understand what writing involves and who act as agents in their writing" (98). Given such an understanding of the writing center tutor's privileged re-

lationship with student clients, to require that tutor to report session information to someone who does have grade-giving power just doesn't seem right.

When I began my position at the University of Montevallo last year, one of the primary responsibilities of my job was to assume coordination of my school's writing center, whose director recently had retired. The writing center where I had worked during my graduate studies had not sent session reports to teachers, so the notion of doing so was completely alien to me. Quite frankly, sending the reports seemed to me a breach of student clients' privacy rights. During a new teacher orientation, my school's registrar emphatically explained that all teachers in public higher education are under a legal obligation not to share academic information about our students with outsiders—such as a student's classmates, parents, or employers—without that student's permission and presence. Concerned about the legality of the writing center session reports, I called the registrar, who stated that the sharing of information about students among interested individuals within the institution is not susceptible to legal intervention, although (just to be on the safe side) our writing center tutors would be well-advised, she suggested, to exercise caution in determining what to say on a report.

Still, despite the registrar's somewhat vague assurance, I did not want us to be in the business of sending session reports to faculty. So, when I met with my tutors for the first training session, I told them we would not be sending the reports "for the time being." I suppose I was hoping that my denial would just make the issue go away. Well, it wasn't long before some faculty members—professors who had been at the University long before I took my position—began to ask me about the report forms they had become used to receiving in the past. Two instructors told me that a few

weeks earlier they had required certain students to work on their drafts with a writing center tutor before resubmitting them, and that they looked for the reports as confirmation that those requirements had been met. One teacher said she would give them "two gold stars" if they took a particular assignment to the writing center; she had planned to award those "gold stars" after receiving the session reports. Another said he was teaching several students who said they were working regularly with tutors, but that he hadn't received reports on any of them. I realized quite quickly that I had been wrong to simply discontinue a practice that had previously been routine, without discussing it and definitely without announcing it.

So I brought up the issue at my department's next faculty meeting. I was surprised at the deep support for the reports that came from about half of the department. Among the arguments for receiving the reports were simple interest ("I just like to know which students are going to the writing center"), pedagogical concerns ("From the reports I learn what I need to stress more in class"), assessment concerns ("If my students use the writing center, I'll give them special consideration when I figure their grades"), and in general a basic belief that teachers have a right to know what their students do in the writing center, combined with a conviction that writing centers have a responsibility to provide that information to teachers. The members of my department who did not argue for continuing the reports either questioned, as I did, their ethicality, or admitted that they hadn't paid much attention to the reports when they had been sent before I became the writing center's coordinator.

A day after that faculty meeting, I went to my chair's office. "I'm not sure what was settled yesterday," I told her. "I don't think anything was," she responded, adding that she tended to agree with my misgivings. In particu-

lar, she said she didn't feel comfortable with the position that session reports created for our tutors—all but one of whom were graduate students or advanced undergraduates. While she had no doubts about these tutors' abilities to consult productively with their peers about writing assignments, she felt that it was unreasonable for us to ask them to be held accountable for identifying, assessing, and describing students' writing strengths and problems. With the question still unresolved, I suggested that I would raise the session report issue on the WCenter electronic discussion list, in order to learn more about the practices and the rationales for those practices at other schools. In my post, I described my situation and my sentiments, then asked to hear what writing centers in other institutions did.

More than 20 responses to my query were posted within the next 24 hours. Seven respondents said they routinely notify teachers of their students' writing center visits, most with similar rationales: students feel their writing center visits give them an edge with professors; teachers want to know about students' experiences with their writing assignments; session reports build writing center visibility on campus; and the content of reports provides teachers with clear information and a language for talking about the writing process. Eight of those who responded also expressed primarily positive views about sending reports, but stressed that reports were sent to faculty only with students' written permission. One respondent indicated mixed feelings, but said her center sends reports unless students request that they not be sent. Another said he didn't routinely send reports, but that he will write one at a student's request.

There were only four "no" responses. The arguments stated in these posts, for the most part, were emphatically resistant to the practice. For example, one writing center director said that sending reports "can severely compromise who we are and what we stand

for." Another said she refused to send reports "because it's our mission to serve student writing, not specific writing programs and faculty." Another made a practical point: "If a writer wants to inform her instructor what she worked on outside of class and with whom, she is perfectly free to do so. Why should I assume that responsibility for her?" Besides this response, the post that most influenced me was from a writing center director who expressed similar resistance to the reporting process, but who had found a way to provide the verification and information teachers say they want, without putting her writing center tutors into a position of becoming or being perceived as evaluators. Several semesters back, this center had devised an informal process that gives students the responsibility for writing the reports their teachers receive. "Then," wrote this director, "if the tutor agrees that the student's description represents the session (or as much of it as the student wants to reveal), he or she signs the form and the student takes it to the professor. We believe this comes as close as we can to maintaining our bond of privacy with the student. It also allows the tutor to see what the student actually got out of the session."[1]

Like most stories, mine has a resolution. Despite my own unwillingness to have tutors send reports on sessions, I did realize that there are positive possibilities for them. First, on a practical level, I decided that our center did need to have a process in place to assist students whose teachers had advised or required them to make a writing center visit. In addition, I believed we could devise the process in such a way as to encourage communication between teachers and students, while simultaneously increasing the writing center's visibility. So, working with my university's public relations officer, I designed a reporting form that balances the ethical and pedagogical considerations that seem so important to me. Our center now provides two-part "Tutoring Session Report" forms,

with the writing center's name, location, and telephone number prominently displayed. On the left side of the form are blanks for the teacher's name and department and for the student's and tutor's signatures. Between these are nine blank lines on which students may write about their center visit in any way they choose. To the right is a preprinted message from me. It says: "Dear UM Faculty Member: We are pleased that your student has chosen to work with a tutor in the Harbert Writing Center. We also appreciate your support of our work. If you have any questions about this session or any other services offered by the Center, please contact me at my office." I included this message expressly so that if teachers become concerned about the nature of any tutoring sessions, they would convey these concerns directly to me instead of to tutors, who I don't think should be held accountable to teachers' expectations or concerns.

We began using the forms at the beginning of the Spring 1996 semester. So far, we've found that most students have declined to send a report to their teachers; most of these say their teachers already know they're using our services, and for that reason the note is unnecessary. So our 1,000 two part forms may last a little longer than the one academic year I originally had projected. But that is fine with me, especially if it's because students are doing these reports in their own voices, and in their own words, and—most importantly—on their own initiative.

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[1]This particular discussion of writing center session reports took place on WCenter during October 1995 and may be accessed through WCenter's archives, available on the Internet at gopher://gopher.ttu.edu:70/7waissrc%3A/etc/wais-searches/wcenter.src.

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WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Student agendas for writing center conferences (Part III)

Anybody feel like talking about grammar again?

Let's face it (as if we could possibly deny it): grammar is a continuing problem for writing centers. Most students think the biggest problem with their writing is their grammar (and they're usually wrong). Most students think that grammar is what the writing center focuses on above all else (and in some writing centers this opinion may not be far wrong). Many faculty members think that writing centers should be paying a lot more attention to grammar than they seem to be doing (Hayward 4-5). And, interestingly enough, relatively few tutors—in my experience— know very much about formal grammar at all (and I'm not convinced that's necessarily a bad thing).

A lot of students who visit writing centers for the first time routinely expect that tutors will begin their sessions by reading through papers and checking for all the grammar mistakes. That's certainly what a lot of their teachers have done with their papers in the past, and they have no immediate reason to believe the tutors in the writing center will be any different. What's even worse, perhaps, is that they have developed the mindset that grammar problems are the *only* really important problems that need to be attended to in most papers, and that once they are resolved, the paper will be acceptable to their teachers and to academia at large. On the initial encounter form that students fill out each time they come into the Writers' Workshop at the Univer-

sity of Illinois, they are asked to specify what part or feature of their paper they would most like to work on with tutors. Nearly one half of all the responses say they want to work on their grammar. I suspect one of the reasons for this may be because "grammar" has become, in their minds, a generic term that encompasses virtually every rhetorical, grammatical, and discourse-specific problem that might appear in their texts, but even so, the term never fails to turn up unpleasant associations for them—usually including sentence diagramming, dry-as-dust handbooks, and mind-numbing exercises. While students are frequently relieved to discover that they will not be required to spend conference time meticulously poring over their texts for the occasional error in subject-verb agreement or the ubiquitous dangling modifier, they are just as often upset and concerned that the writing center is not addressing the one aspect of their writing that they *know* their instructors are going to nail them for. ESL students are particularly sensitive to grammatical concerns when they bring papers into the center. Not only are their grammar problems likely to be more severe and in need of attention than those of native speakers, but the English training they received in their home country was, more often than not, entirely grammar-centered and rule-focused (Harris and Silva; Gadbow 3; Powers 3).

When students come into the workshop indicating that they expect—and many times want—to work on their

grammar, how should tutors deal with this agenda? Sometimes, of course, grammar will be exactly what needs attention. The paper may be well developed and organized but have severe problems with syntax, and in such a case, grammar instruction should become the central theme for the conference. But what if a tutor believes that other aspects of the paper are far more important to address than its grammar? Suppose a tutor sees that a paper has an unclear thesis or is sloppily organized or has no specific examples to support its claims, but the writer insists that she wants to work on her grammar. How strongly should the tutor push his agenda for the conference over hers, and when should he decide to give way? And to what extent does the response style of the student's instructor come into play? If, for example, the instructor makes clear (either on an assignment sheet or via a previously graded paper) that grammatical correctness is heavily weighted in her evaluation and grading scheme, then where do the tutor's responsibilities—to the student, to the text, to the center, and to the instructor—lie?

Requests for evaluation

All of us who work in writing centers have also had to face this question from a student at one time or another: "If you had to give this paper a grade right now, what grade would you give it?" It's a perfectly natural question to ask, and to students, we're a perfectly appropriate audience to ask it of. We've seen hundreds if not thousands of stu-

dent papers through our work as tutors or teachers, and we should have a pretty good idea of how one student paper stacks up against another. Besides, to put it bluntly, it's our *job* to read and evaluate student writing, to make assessments of its strengths and weaknesses, and to discern how best to solve whatever problems that writing might have. Much of what we do in our conferences with students is talk about our evaluations of their papers' relative merits. Why shouldn't students expect us to know what sort of grade their paper might ultimately receive?

Well, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, an evaluation is not an evaluation is not an evaluation. One of the best known and most anecdotally used pieces of research in English studies is Paul Diederich, John French, and Sydell Carlton's study of grading practices among experienced teachers of English that demonstrated rather conclusively that it is pointless to talk about individual papers having innate "A" qualities or "B" qualities that can be discerned and agreed upon by all audiences. This study showed that even among members of the same discipline and area of study, the same student paper could receive any grade from "A" to "F," depending on the particular criteria and set of standards being applied (Diederich 5). Once we expand the range of evaluation variables to include discipline-specific criteria with which a particular tutor is likely to be unfamiliar, the likelihood of being able to guess at an "accurate" grade decreases exponentially. Fortunately, most students are generally willing to accept our explanation that it is "against policy" to guess at grades, since we can never know exactly what a particular instructor will be looking for in a given paper.

And speaking pragmatically, there is no better way to sabotage any sort of close relation between the writing center and faculty members than to allow

tutors to start speculating about paper grades in conferences. Whenever students ask my opinion about their potential grade, the first image that comes to my mind is that big robot from *Lost in Space*, waving his arms and shouting, "Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!" There is nothing in the world that will guarantee an angry phone call from an irate faculty member more certainly than a student who says, "Why did you give me a "B" on this paper? The people in the writing center said it deserved an "A.""

Yet, as I said before, an evaluation is not an evaluation is not an evaluation. Tutors *do* evaluate student papers. They may not give letter grades or suggest what grades others will give, but they form opinions about the papers they read. They know what they like about them, they know what they dislike about them, and they probably have an impression about how good or bad the paper is relative to the other papers they've looked at over the years—or even when compared to other papers from the same class. The real ethical questions here are: Which evaluations can ethically be passed on to the student? How should these evaluations be phrased and/or contextualized? What sorts of evaluative comparisons are ethical for writing center tutors to make and which are not?

I offer the following scenarios for you to consider in this regard. How would you respond to each of these student requests, and why?

Context: A student who has been to the center several times before comes in for an appointment with you, toting a ten-page draft of a political science paper in his backpack. This is the first time you personally have worked with him, but the notes in his file from other tutors indicate that he is particularly concerned about grades and his performance in class, possibly because he's a

pre-law student and hopes to attend an ivy league university in another two years. How would you respond to this student under the following circumstances:

1) After reading through the paper with him, you have a sense that the paper is basically well written and well organized and makes some good use of examples. Some of the transitions are a bit weak, and the focus seems to wander from the main line of argument occasionally, but you work with him on these areas productively. He seems bright and motivated if somewhat anxious about composing a "perfect" paper. At the end of the conference, you tell him you think he did a pretty good job on the paper overall and you enjoyed reading it. He then asks you, "If you had to give a grade to this paper, what grade would you give it?"

2) [The same situation as in #1, but] He then asks you, "Compared to the other political science papers you've seen students bring in here, how do think this one rates?"

3) After reading through the paper with him, you realize that his draft contains some fairly significant flaws, including a thesis—"Democracy is the best political system ever conceived by man"—that is too vague and too broad (not to mention sexist) to be defended adequately in an eight- to ten-page paper. He tends to rely overmuch on unsubstantiated assertions about democracy, totalitarianism, fascism, and communism, confusing sloganeering with evidence. You spend a fair amount of time in the tutorial session addressing some of these issues with him, and in spite of your attempts to be supportive and helpful in guiding the next revision, he begins to get more and more upset. By the end of the conference, he seems to be near tears. Just before he leaves, he asks you, "Compared to the other political science papers you've seen students bring in

here, how do think this one rates?"

4) [The same situation as in #3, but] Just before he leaves, he asks you, "If I make the changes we talked about in my next revision, do you think it will at least be a passing paper?"

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National Writing Centers Association Membership Form

The Assembly:

The National Writing Center, an NCTE Assembly, was founded in 1983 to foster communication among writing centers and to provide a forum for concerns. Comprised of directors and staffs of writing centers at universities, two-year colleges, and public schools, the NWCA is governed by an Executive Board that includes representatives from the regional writing center organizations.

Publications:

The Assembly sponsors two publications. The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, edited by Muriel Harris at Purdue, provides a monthly forum for writing center concerns during the academic year. The *Writing Center Journal*, edited by Joan Mullin (University of Toledo) and Al DeCiccio (Merrimack College), offers in its two issues per year longer articles on writing center theory and research.

Awards:

NWCA offers the following awards: (1) an award to recognize individuals who have made significant contributions to writing centers, and (2) awards to recognize outstanding publications on writing centers. In addition, small grants are available to graduate students whose research focuses on writing centers. NWCA also supports regional association conferences with speaker grants.

Web Page:

http://departments.colgate.edu/diw/NWCA.html

The NWCA website, an attempt to gather together information of interest to the writing center community, contains information and announcements about NWCA and its activities. It includes resources for writing center administrators and staff, stories by and for tutors, an online version of the NWCA starter kit for new writing centers, some general resources for writers, and links to over 200 writing centers on the web. For more information, to contribute to, or to help update the site, please write to Bruce Pegg, Colgate University Writing Center, Hamilton, NY 13346; e-mail: bpegg@mail.colgate.edu; or call 315-228-7376

Meetings:

The NWCA meets twice a year, once during NCTE and once during CCCC, plus during the NWCA conference in alternate years. At the November convention, NWCA sponsors a day-long workshop; at CCCC in March, the assembly sponsors a special interest session, along with an exchange of writing center materials. The Executive Board meetings at these conferences are open to the membership.

Name: _____

Preferred Mailing Address: _____

Options:

	U.S.	Canada	Overseas
NWCA Membership:	$10	$10	$10
Writing Center Journal:	$10	$15	$15
Writing Lab Newsletter:	$15	$20	$40
Membership + *WCJ:*	$20	$25	$25
Membership + *WLN:*	$25	$30	$50
Membership + *WCJ + WLN:*	$35	$45	$65

Send checks payable to NWCA to Neal Lerner, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy & Allied Health Sciences, 179 Longwood Ave. Boston, MA 02115 (U.S.A.) Questions? Phone 617-732-2824 or e-mail nlerner@mcp.edu. NWCA cannot send out invoices or process purchase orders.

Retrospective: 1998 Conference of the South Carolina Writing Center Association

In Charleston, SC, from February 6-7, the South Carolina Writing Center Association (SCWCA) held its annual conference focusing on the theme "Retrospective," examining the past, present, and future of writing labs. Hosted by Tom Waldrep of the Medical University of South Carolina, the conference attracted seventy-eight participants, representing twenty-one institutions from South Carolina, North Carolina, and Kentucky.

Exploring the conference theme, the opening panel "Dial 1-900-Psychic" concluded that although more specialized writing centers will arise (such as for medical students or business writers), the role of general writing labs is more important than ever. Carolyn Matalene, Jennie Ariail, and Sandy Dickerson argued that general labs will help students understand the rhetorics of disciplines, will show them there is,

indeed, a process and rhetorical context to writing, and will continue to be the central place to explore what it means to write electronically. In the future, writing labs will play another vital role: reaching out to communities, especially high schools and technical colleges.

The keynote speaker Joseph Comprone, of Arizona State University-West, also discussed the conference theme in his address "What the Writing Center Really Means." After explaining that in the 1970's writing labs began as "glue" and "gap fillers" to provide students with basic skills, Comprone predicted the "Millennial Mission" for labs: they will serve as "a unifying force behind the learning of university students." Labs will become "centers of gravity," expanding the teaching of writing to include the personal, academic, and public dimen-

sions of learning and communication. Then, academic walls separating disciplines will finally fall.

Conference sessions also carried out the "Retrospective" theme by discussing ever-present problems plaguing labs, like dispelling misperceptions of the writing center's mission, working with students writing about literature, helping clients when spellcheck fails, dealing with the psychological needs of student writers, aiding ESL clients, and developing students' persuasive skills. Other sessions "looked ahead," examining the best use of the Internet as well as the roles of specialized labs for freshman engineers and business communication students.

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THE WRITING LAB
N E W S L E T T E R