THE WRITING LAB

...FROM THE EDITOR...

As you browse through the middle column on this page—listing the contents of this month's newsletter—you'll find an interesting mix of new and old issues. Should we go online? Are computers really welcome in our labs, or do they invite students to view us as merely places to print out their disks or check their e-mail? Katie Stahlnecker, Bryan Kopp, and Don Vescio find that new technology offers rationales for increasing our collaboration with instructors, enhancing staff morale, and making our services more widely available.

But as we explore what technology can add to a writing lab, we continue to deal with familiar issues: tutoring ESL students, overcoming expectations about our services as proofreading shops, using writing to find answers to tutoring questions, and mediating between students and their instructors. Other essays in this issue revisit these recurring topics.

And to add some new horizons to our familiar organizational structures, NWCA President Al DeCiccio tells us of the possibility of an international meeting in Europe.

• Muriel Harris, editor

Virtually transforming the writing center: On-Line conversation, collaboration, and connection

In academic circles, one might assume that any entity that fosters the very critical thinking, challenge, and collaboration that constitute the foundation of higher learning would command due respect and appreciation. However, as we all know, such is not always true in the case of writing centers. Although such centers of intellectual activity have made their way onto the majority of college campuses in the United States, all too many students and even instructors are suspicious, critical, and largely misinformed about our services.

Students who visit our writing center at Creighton at the strong urging of a professor make comments such as "I don't really need this, but my prof made me come." Those who have never visited us commonly say, "Oh, I don't need that. I do OK on my papers. Besides, isn't that for ESL students?" Or my personal favorite—"Are you

kidding? I took AP English in high school." Similarly, uninformed instructors in other departments often fear that sending students our way in some way suggests a weakness on their part or that encouraging students to visit us means that they endorse the absurd rumor that we will write the papers for the students. In fact, I know of one professor at Creighton who has actually announced to his classes that the Writing Center should be avoided because he doesn't want the tutors doing his students' work; students who have

visited the Writing Center receive an automatic "F" for the paper. Equally astonishing, professors in the English department often consider an assignment in the Writing Center as a step down, even punishment. Just last year, for instance, a first-time instructor in our department was outraged when the chair assigned to her one composition class and 10 hours a week in the Writing Center. After all, she was a "good teacher," and everyone knows that "good teachers" teach only in the classroom.

We tutors, however, know that all of these reactions and concerns, even fears, are unfounded. However, the reality is that misconceptions exist, and they stand in our way both of serving the entire campus community and of commanding due respect. As Molly Wingate points out, "these writing center policies might make good, pragmatic sense, but if they are misunderstood throughout the institution, they hinder the center's ability to function" (106).

Furthermore, claims Bob Whipple, writing centers "are often excluded because they are seen as a 'fix-it,' a clinic, a lab, an ancillary. Writing center faculty need to take more power so that they can exercise more power, and, in so doing, give more power to the university writing community." Obviously, we need to concentrate our efforts on improving the image of our centers. With instructors both in and outside of the English department, we somehow need to position ourselves as white-collar colleagues rather than blue-collar comma cops. Similarly, with the students we need to present ourselves as tutors for those on the cutting edge not just the remedial level as is commonly associated with the need for a tutor.

Hence, I contend that tutors can elevate the image of the writing center across the university by incorporating technology on as many levels as pos-

sible, thereby not only connecting with professors and growing with the students' needs but also, as Eric Crump puts it, "increasing [our] chances of survival into the next century." The services that we currently offer lend themselves nicely to such a transition. According to Muriel Harris, "Because writing centers focus on one-to-one interaction with writers and because they invite collaboration and dialogue about writing as part of their tutorial approach, on-line programs developed in various writing centers are continuing this emphasis as they reach out to writers in new ways" (1).

First, I discuss a way that tutors can clear up misconceptions and gain appreciation among their campus colleagues: by e-mailing instructor notifications. Second, I explain why we need to begin tutoring students on web pages and hypertextual documents and provide on-line resources for writers. Third, I argue that writing centers should offer e-mail and on-screen tutorials. Finally, I discuss the need for writing center professionals to actively pursue new ways to virtually transform our centers so that we may one day soon receive the credit that we deserve for our efforts to promote higher learning. Such efforts to incorporate technology are crucial because as Crump further notes:

> Even if the ratio of face-to-face to online writing centers is still weighted strongly toward face-to-face, a fundamental shift has occurred. Face-to-face may have the numbers still, but it is no longer the default, no longer the inevitable starting point for writing assistance nor its benchmark. That point of reference has shifted online.

Thus, the first thing we need to do to accommodate this shift is to make an effort to reposition ourselves in the university by initiating communication and collaboration with instructors in all departments so that they may come to understand, and consequently, to sup-

port and promote us as colleagues rather than conspirators. One way to do that is to go where many of them are—online—and strike up a conversation about tutorials with their students. At Creighton, we traditionally send written reports to instructors summarizing our visits with their students. However, given the rush of business, the lack of clerical help, and the mode of campus mail, they receive these notifications sometimes weeks after the fact. By this time, they have probably already evaluated the student's paper; thus, the content of the message holds less weight, and after a quick glance, the instructor likely deposits the notification in the trash without another thought.

With e-mail notifications, on the other hand, the one-sided notification becomes an invitation for conversation among colleagues. As Linda M. Harasim points out, "New communication technologies introduce powerful environments to enhance social and intellectual connectivities" (39). The instructors receive the notifications on the same day as the tutorial (which is often the day before the paper is due), and because of the ease of composing a quick response to a message received, the instructors usually comment on or even ask questions regarding the content of the tutorial. In the five years that I have tutored in Creighton's Writing Center, less than five percent of the instructors to whom I have sent notifications via traditional mail have ever made the effort to contact me regarding my work with their students. Conversely, of the e-mail tutorials that I sent in a recent semester, over eighty percent prompted some response via e-mail from the instructors. For instance, a biology professor replied with "Thanks for the help. I think we are making progress, but slow at times. It's hard to get all the students the help that they need. Thanks for all the support." A theology instructor assured me that he "will capitalize on what [I] recommended" to his student. And, a professor in the Classics department said, "I

received your notification for your meeting with Ryan, and it sounds as if you said everything that I would want him to hear." Many others thanked me for my work with their students, agreed with my concerns regarding their students' writing, or asked what I think they could do to help their students improve their writing.

By engaging in even semi-regular conversation and in many cases collaborating with instructors to help their students become better writers, I sense a new level of respect between us. The instructors seem to realize that we share the same goals for their students. Suddenly, it has become a teacher-to-teacher exchange rather than one of professor and helper—i.e., the tutor is comma cop turned colleague. A virtual step in the right direction. Through mere association with fellow educators, outside instructors' impressions of the writing center are bound to improve. Once this electronic exchange brings instructors to a higher level of understanding of the work we do in the writing center by involving them more directly, they will see the value of our work; hence, they will undoubtedly begin, or continue in some cases, to promote rather than voice skepticism regarding our services.

The next step, then, is to improve our image first among these students who will be urged to familiarize themselves with our service and ultimately among the student population in general. We can start by replacing the remedial-only labels traditionally stuck on us by students who have some degree of competency in writing. One way of doing this is by offering tutorials on such cutting-edge modes of writing as hypertextual documents and web pages and by developing Gopher and World Wide Web sites that link students to instructional handouts and other useful tools for writing. At Creighton, as surely is the case at most schools in this information age, we now have computer specialists in the English department and plenty of campus com-

puter assistance; therefore, we have the resources to train our tutors to conduct various types of electronic tutorials.

We must take advantage of such opportunities because as Harris asserts, "In high schools and colleges, new Internet environments for students who are writing in many fields have proliferated, and they continue to develop almost as fast as the Internet is developing" (1). Furthermore, as Faigley and Romano see it, "we expect to be traveling new roads with our students not because we have entered a new era of literacy but because students now demand an education they perceive as relevant to the twenty-first century and not the nineteenth" (57). Since students and instructors alike face the constant challenge of exploring and mastering these new and advanced modes of writing and doing research, they will soon find a need for such an added resource to the writing center. Through campus advertisement, promotion of our services in cyberclasses, and word of mouth, eventually, our work with these new and advanced forms of writing will alter the stereotypical association we have with menial tasks such as proofreading.

Working with students on their online writing and providing more online services will then hopefully lead to more on-screen tutorials, both synchronously and asynchronously. This switch will be a positive one because it promotes the collaborative, process-oriented environment of composition classrooms. As Harasim further notes,

> Historically, the social, affective, and cognitive benefits of peer interaction and collaboration have been available only in face-to-face learning. The introduction of online education opens unprecedented opportunities for educational interactivity. The mediation of the computer further distinguishes the nature of the activity online, introducing entirely new elements to the learning process. (42)

When tutor and student work side by side or even from remote sites with the student in charge of her document, she is bound to feel less like she is being corrected and more like she is working on her project with the help of someone else. Such empowerment of the student will inevitably improve student attitude and involvement. In fact, in an analysis of electronic interchanges, Ruberg and Taylor found that "student on-line behavior showed that students were taking more responsibility for the interchanges" (5). Thus, by thoroughly explaining not only the content but also the process of these tutorials in instructor notifications and by inviting instructors and their classes to tour the writing center during working hours, we could illustrate the benefits of the added resource. Instructors, particularly those who fear that tutors take charge of students' writing, would undoubtedly find this method of tutoring appealing since it more obviously puts the students in control. Plus, once other teachers, particularly in the English department, see the very workshop approach that they teach in their classes working in an ideal one-to-one setting with tutors, perhaps they will gain a new respect for the level of instruction in the writing center. Furthermore, when these instructors realize that tutors are advancing perhaps more than they are technologically, probably they will even come to welcome rather than deplore an assignment to tutor for a semester.

Those of us who already see such an assignment for what it is—a privilege rather than a punishment—need to initiate such virtual leaps in our writing centers. As always, our main objective is to keep up with the changing needs of our students; therefore, as classes in cyberspace grow in number and as interest in the Internet increases, so does the need for us to work with students on computers and computer projects. Obviously, technology will define the future of all aspects of education, even the writing center, so we tutors need to

make sure that the university does more than just add a few computers to the lab. In essence, we need to participate in what Tim Mayers terms "the challenge of composition teaching for the present time and into the near future . . . to help students (even as we help ourselves) become skillful navigators between the various types of literacy required of them" (153). We, as tutors, need to recognize and pursue our role in the virtual transformation of education.

The exciting thing is that, as Harris asserts "as the Internet grows and develops, on-line writing centers will take on new shapes and provide learning environments for writers in ways we cannot yet predict" (4). Furthermore, according to Grimm, "as places of research and knowledge-making, writing centers are uniquely situated to invite undergraduates into intellectual work that makes a difference" (546). Therefore, adding these and the many other electronic resources being used in writing centers today to our repertoire will inevitably present our service to the university in a more positive light so that instructors and even A.P. students realize that we, indeed, promote all that they promote in a quest for higher learning.

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"Climate control" for the writing center: A collaborative web project to improve staff morale

The work in writing centers is surprisingly seasonal; the staff drowns in floods of students panicked by Spring deadlines, or wanders through desert heat seeing mirages—is that, could it be, yes, it's a student! The waves of students follow more or less predictable patterns, because teachers have a way of always giving the same deadlines, but the problem remains for tutors: what to do in down times. Homework, study for exams, gossip, e-mail friends? While a staff certainly needs rest between the storms, a tutor without a tutee is truly unfortunate, and a tutor with nothing to do is even more so. This problem is intensified for new writing labs and new tutoring programs, for which "word of mouth" hasn't spread and business is slow.

At Purdue, we had been developing a staff of specialized undergraduate tutors for business writing when our efforts ground to a halt. On the one hand, we had a staff of highly motivated, talented, and professional tutors; on the other, we had few clients. Not only did we want to raise awareness of our specialized services within the larger context of the Writing Lab, but we also needed to update our instructional materials in both on-line and print formats. Finally, as the Coordinator of the Business Writing Tutoring Program, I put the proverbial two and two together, and it equaled collaborative web project. Since our lab is equipped with computers and much of the staff was computer savvy, the solution was obvious. Why not spend our down time developing Writing Lab resources that will, in turn, help us promote our services?

The Business Writing staff decided the résumé handouts were our number one priority, and we began setting more specific goals. After critiquing existing materials, each tutor volunteered to draft sections of new handouts to be placed on the Web and photocopied as handouts. During staff meetings, we devoted time to exchanging feedback, and it was during such a meeting that I realized what was happening. Not only had we found "something to do"; we had started to reap all the benefits of true collaboration. We were becoming colleagues, pooling knowledge and experience, fostering a group identity, and, what's more, we were getting to know each other better. As an added bonus, by plunging into unknown terrain, we were giving ourselves an opportunity for personal growth and professional development. All of these benefits, I'm convinced, will help us tutor more effectively, allowing us to learn alongside each other.

When tutors were scheduled to take appointments—but there were none to take—they spent time working on our collaborative web project. Some tutors researched their topics on the Internet, others discussed their topics with each other, and yet others sat at computers drafting handouts. One tutor, Marcella, took it upon herself to start playing with the technical side of the web design we had agreed upon as a staff. Marcella continued to learn new web skills as she experimented with formats she had never used on her own homepage. Although we preferred to be tutoring, helping students face-to-face, we were comforted to know that

our slow times would not be wasted. After all, in an era of distance learning and web-based instruction, we can help writers write better even when they are not physically present in the room with us.

Scott, one of our new tutors, e-mailed me with the following note of despair after he completed the training practicum: "I'm really confused. I am in the Writing Lab now, and it is the second week in a row that I have not had any appointments or drop-ins." A few weeks later, he e-mailed me in response to a questionnaire: "I really have enjoyed the web project. I feel it is crucial that we have a working on-line résumé, for people across the world to have access to." He had a sense of purpose again, and he was not alone, for our staff meetings were filled with that spontaneous energy that accompanies every worthwhile endeavor. During the slowest time of the semester, when staff morale often dips, our staff was enthusiastic and involved.

We are, at present, still in the development stages of the project, but soon our section of the OWL web site will be up and running. (If you'd like to see our work in progress, visit <*http:// owl.english.purdue.edu/bw*>) In the words of Chad, another tutor, "I think the Web Project is great. It is going to give us something new to promote at the Writing Lab and help create awareness of the Writing Lab." Simply stated, our web project will give us a new way to promote ourselves and will give us something new to promote. Other campus web sites will be able to

link to us, such as the Professional Writing Program and the School of Management, and many students around the university (and the world) will have a new writing resource.

Indeed, the web project will help us tutor in cyberspace, but it will also help us with our traditional "flesh and blood" tutorials. We'll have improved handouts and, more exciting yet, we'll have made possible a new tutorial environment. Our tutors will have another option for computer-mediated instruction because Writing Lab clients, who are often either computer literate or want to be, will be able to sit down with a tutor at a computer connected to our web page.

Many a lab director has lamented the loss of all her most experienced tutors upon graduation. A collaborative web project could help minimize the losses. The new materials we are creating will help us forge a link with future tutors, allowing existing tutors to share their insights and experiences. In effect, we are opening a dialog across time. The

web project could even function as a training tool for new tutoring staff.

Clearly, a writing center profits in numerous ways from the constructive use of down time, but tutors also benefit from a collaborative web project. They gain marketable experience in web authoring and computer technology, and they grow as communicators by developing their skills in collaboration. As they create instructional materials, they also learn strategies to improve their own writing, whether they are developing their own résumés or other documents. As learners learning, tutors grow both personally and professionally, and the abilities they develop in the writing center translate into credentials in the work world or in graduate school.

As with all collaborative projects, of course, expectations need to be adjusted or frustration runs rampant. Collaboration *is* more than the sum total of its parts, but it would be a mistake to assume that the "more" is always measurable in its visible products. With the

web project we've undertaken, the "more" has been primarily affective: deeper interest in the goals of a writing center, broader understanding of its audiences, and greater confidence in tutoring. Moreover, by stretching out our timeline and by dividing our work into manageable pieces—giving us more time to do less—we've kept the headaches at bay.

While the seasons of tutoring are here to stay, a collaborative web project can provide a writing center with "climate control," maintaining throughout the year a comfortable tutoring environment, even when tutees are only virtually present.

The undergraduate tutors participating in this project include Cheri Beard, Scott Epstein, Chad Gilezan, Michele Jasik, Betty Kim, Stephanie Lishewski, Marcella Romero, Colleen Ryan, and Monique Sagita.

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National Writing Centers Association and East Central Writing Centers Association

Call for Proposals
April 15-17, 1999
Bloomington, Indiana
"Writing Center 2000: Meeting the Challenges of the New Century"
Keynote speakers: Muriel Harris and Edward M. White

Proposals are solicited for individual presentations, panel presentations, interactive workshops, and poster presentations on topics including—but not limited to—defining the evolving missions of writing centers, reconciling theory and practice, and considering writing centers' effects on the culture of writing in their institutions.

Proposal should be submitted by December 1, 1998; submission guidelines will be mailed to the members of the NWCA and regional writing center associations and are available as well at http://www.indiana.edu/~nwca99/. Inquiries may be directed to Ray Smith, Director, Campus Writing Program, Franklin Hall 008, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 47405. Phone 812-855-4928; e-mail nwca99@indiana.edu.

Web site design for a writing center

As Director of Wilkes University's Writing Center and faculty member of the Department of English, I am always looking for ways to promote writing on campus. Wilkes has a strong tradition of supporting writing across the curriculum, and students who attend the Writing Center come from a variety of disciplines. When I first arrived at Wilkes, however, I found that the Writing Center was not always accessible to students, nor did it integrate well with daily classroom activity. Limitations in staffing and funding prevented any substantial physical expansion of the Center, and the difficulty of printing and duplicating material on campus made it impractical to revise paper handouts and guides on a consistent basis. In order for Wilkes' Writing Center to become more central in the education of its undergraduates, I wanted to come up with a way to make it more useful to students outside normal hours of operation and faculty who wished to use its resources as part of their class activities.

It seemed to me that the Web would be a natural medium for expanding the outreach of the Writing Center. If students and faculty could create virtual environments by using email and designing home pages, then the Writing Center certainly should be able to do the same. The Web, widely accessible and easy to use, offers a way to publish and update general and course-specific material in a cost effective fashion. Additionally, it enables the Writing Center, through external links and email, to become part of a broader academic community. Finally, as the Web becomes more of a part of the Writing Center, issues of proximity are much less important. For instance, students frequently could not meet with peer tutors because the Center's hours were inconvenient for their schedules. Simi-

larly, faculty who taught early morning or evening courses were excluded from using the Writing Center during class periods. While direct interaction with Center staff is still the most effective means of delivering instruction, placing its collection of reference material on the Web and enabling email queries went a long way in making the Center more accessible.

Before working on the Wilkes' Writing Center site, I first wanted to see how other writing centers were using the Web. As I surveyed the sites, I noted the content, structure, and design of each page. Most were consistent in content and design, relying on single frame constructions that contained both internal and external links.[1] Perhaps the most comprehensive (and frequently linked to) site is Purdue University's On-line Writing Lab (http://owl.english.purdue.edu). Purdue's site contains an impressive collection of handouts, reference material, writing-related links, and search tools and indexes in a relatively easy-to-use format. Missouri University's Online Writery (http://www.missouri.edu/~writery/) is especially friendly for teachers and students, listing links to course outlines at other institutions and offering a simple newsgroup structure to encourage students to publish and solicit feedback in their writing. George Mason University Writing Center (http://osfl.gmu.edu/~wcenter/) solicits and responds to client writing via email, while the University of Maine Writing Center Online (http://www.ume.maine.edu/~writing) is especially strong in its layout and design, offering simple graphics and a format that would be easy to update.

Based on the survey of these and many other sites, I next developed the design criteria for Wilkes University's

Writing Center site. After consultation with faculty and students, I concluded that the Center's Web site should:
- be easily updated;
- load quickly;
- rely on as few external links as possible to lend greater consistency in design and to minimize access delays;
- contain information and materials useful for students, teachers, and Writing Center staff;
- be useful in individual, writing center, and classroom contexts;
- contain basic information on computer and Internet skills.

I noted two recurrent problems in the writing center Web sites I surveyed, The first was that content was not always intuitively accessible or current; the second was that frequently the graphic elements of a site's design slowed the loading of individual pages to such a degree that it made them frustrating to use in most normal classroom situations. I concluded that Wilkes' Writing Center site must strive for a greater economy of presentation to avoid these shortcomings.

In order to meet these design criteria, I decided to base the Writing Center's home page (http://writenet.home.mindspring.com) on a two-frame structure to make the site easier to navigate. There are disadvantages to using frames in Web page design. Many early Web browsers cannot read frames, and less material can be displayed in an individual frame than on an entire screen, but the ability to divide the screen into discrete and stable sections offers specific user and pedagogical advantages.[2] Wilkes' Writing Center page is divided into two frames: the left frame, which comprises approximately one-third of the page, contains basic information about

the center (location, hours of operation, etc.), an email link to the Writing Center, and links to the principle divisions of the site. This frame is fixed, its content always remaining constant on the left-hand side of the Web page. The right frame, comprising the remaining two-thirds of the page, displays reference materials, style guides, handouts, faculty recommended links, and the tutor's handbook. The two frames are set apart from each other through the use of different background colors (the fixed frame in green, the variable content frame in white), and images throughout the entire site are kept to a minimum. These design features were reached after having extensive conversations with colleagues and students about the problems they encountered when using the Web in the classroom. The most frequently voiced complaints were that many Web sites were confusing to navigate, and that sometimes it was difficult to keep the class together when browsing large or multiple sites. The fixed left frame functions as a constant, enabling the user to return to the navigation links at any time; within the context of classroom practice, instructors found that navigation links in the fixed frame were valuable in guiding groups of students to appropriate sections or references.

Another advantage in using the Web to deliver Writing Center services is its ability to solicit user interaction. I considered developing forms for clients to submit queries to Center staff via the Web, but instead decided that a simple email link in the left fixed frame and in the header of the opening page of the variable content frame would make the site easier to administer and simpler for clients to use.[3] Clients can click on the email link to send a message to Writing Center staff, and they can attach drafts of their work for review and commentary. Email questions and submissions broaden the outreach of the Writing Center—faculty and students can connect to the Writing Center site at any time and from almost any place, assured that they will have access to

the latest handouts and guides, and that they will receive a response to their requests in a timely fashion.

While most users of Wilkes University's Writing Center Web site express their satisfaction with its current content and design, further refinements can be made to make it more effective and interactive. One natural addition to the site would be a section that enables writers to publish works in progress. Such a section could be established as a moderated or unmoderated newsgroup forum.[4] Similarly, a listserv might be another way for writers to share ideas, while a directory of student writers and editors could encourage notions of community that extend beyond the immediate group of one's classmates. But as is the case with any digital publication, it is easier to add new material to a Web site than it is to administer consistently its content, and a simplicity of design and a limited range of opportunity is sometimes more preferable to cutting edge presentation and interactive capabilities. In developing and administering the Writing Center site, I found that there is a relationship between a site's complexity and the likelihood that it will be maintained in a consistent fashion. As a result, I opted for a more limited range of options, putting aside such possibilities as a virtual chat writing center, to concentrate on the delivery of high quality and course-specific content. While the present version of the Center's site is not the most sophisticated, its design is stable enough to function as a base for future expansion and development.

But the Web can never replace the richness of direct contact between people. As a tool that enables broader definitions of community and wider spheres of influence, the Web is unparalleled; what needs to be remembered, however, is that the Web must be part of a more comprehensive environment that emphasizes a variety of different forms of interaction and response. The key to designing effective writing cen-

ter and educational Web sites is consistency—consistency in design, and more importantly, consistency in maintenance. Wilkes University's Writing Center Web site was designed with both types of consistency in mind. As the site continues to grow and evolve, these principles will become even more important in maintaining a stable user experience. This approach to Web design might not be appropriate for all institutions, but it does demonstrate how a site's design should be informed by the realities of practical classroom and writing center instruction.[5]

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Notes

[1] Frames divide a browser window into separate panes so that multiple Web pages can be shown simultaneously. Usually, viewers can scroll through each frame independently. Internal links are also known as relative links and connect files that reside on the same disk or server. External links, also known as absolute links, form connections with files located on other disks or servers (such as Web pages located at a different site).

[2] I considered offering a text-only, single frame alternative site to accommodate Web browsers that cannot read frames. Because this alternative would effectively double the amount of effort to maintain the site, I decided to focus on the framed version of the site only, focusing my attention to its maintenance and development. Since current versions of the major Web browsers are readily accessible, I felt that the framed construction of the site would exclude few potential users.

[3] Interactive forms require a scripting language more sophisticated than simple html to process submitted information. I found form scripts in a number of CGI (Common Gateway Interface) libraries on the Web that

could be easily adapted for use in a writing center page; but once such scripts are obtained, they still must be placed on a server that can process CGI (or one of its equivalents) requests. Additionally many system administrators are concerned that such embedded programs (such as a submission form in a Web page) could lead to breaches in network security. Email avoids most of these difficulties, adding the additional benefit of being accessible to virtually any user.

[4] An unmoderated newsgroup would be accessible to anyone who wishes to share their writing with others, though such a forum might be confusing to the casual user. Moderated newsgroups have the advantage of filtering material before publication, thus encouraging consistency in standards, content, or approach. There are disadvantages to each newsgroup structure. Unmoderated newsgroups inevitably drift from their original intent, occasionally becoming a forum for personal attacks and commentary, and there is the risk that inappropriate or even damaging material might be published. Moderated newsgroups require someone to filter material prior to publication, a task which can become overwhelming in a very short time. Additionally, issues of censorship and freedom of expression inevitably arise when even the most simple principles of selection are applied to newsgroup submissions.

[5] I used Adobe's PageMill 2.0 to design and maintain the Writing Center's Web site, though there are a number of equally capable products on the market that have essentially the same features. For those who have no knowledge of html and who do not wish to learn a Web building application, most major word processing programs will allow documents to be saved in html format. While such word-processed documents might not be sophisticated, they do enable the novice user to define links and publish a basic Web site.

Writing Center Director
Villanova University

Villanova University seeks a full-time director of its University Writing Center. Applicants for this non-tenure track, administrative/staff position should have an advanced degree in Composition/Rhetoric (Ph.D. preferred) and/or solid experience in Writing Center administration. Duties include teaching, staff development, and administration of a busy facility. Salary competitive. Ideal starting date: January 1999. Villanova is a Roman Catholic university founded and sponsored by the Augustinian Order. An Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity employer, Villanova is committed to fostering a faculty and staff rich in diversity and dedicated to Villanova's Judaeo-Christian value orientation.

Applicants should send C.V. (with transcripts), writing sample, and three letters of recommendation to Dr. Charles Cherry, English Department, Villanova University, Villanova, PA 19085. Application deadline: October 30, 1998.

ESL Coordinator and Writing Tutor
St. Joseph College

Saint Joseph College (Connecticut) seeks an individual to teach writing courses and tutor writing across the curriculum. In addition, as a member of the Academic Resources Center, this professional will assist with the college-wide writing portfolio program. The position is full-time, 10 months, with an option for summer work.

A Master's degree, background in ESL, composition theory, and writing assessment are required as are successful experience teaching and/or tutoring in higher education. Please send

résumés to ESL/Tutor Search, c/o Human Resources, Saint Joseph College, 1678 Asylum Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06117. Closing Date: as soon as position is filled.
An EOE/M/F/D/V employer.

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

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; phone: 307-766-5004; fax: 307-766-4822; e-mail: jnelson@uwyo.edu.

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

Feb. 3-6: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Charleston, SC
Contact: Tom Waldrep, Director, The Writing Center, The Medical University of South Carolina, AA 113 Harper Student Center, 45 Courtenay Street, Charleston, SC 29401. Fax: 843-792-9179; e-mail: motenb@musc.edu.

April 15-18: National Writing Centers Association, in Bloomington, IN
Contact: Ray Smith, Campus Writing Program, Franklin 008, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405; phone: 812-855-4928; e-mail: nwca99@indiana.edu; http://www.indiana.edu/~nwca99.

TUTORS' COLUMN

Coping with ESL tutoring fear by using effective strategies

As I walked out of the plane terminal, I was filled with joy and surprise to enter the Wonderland of a new world, the USA. Colorful illuminated signs displayed English foreign words, and seeing individuals who were walking hurriedly to their destination seemed very hectic. This particular feeling was the result of living in a conservative Romanian city. I experienced almost the same Wonderland feeling as an ESL student entering the fast-paced University Writing Center last year. I scanned the friendly yet intent faces of tutors, and after all, my visit was not intimidating since I was determined to improve my paper. Within a year, I was accepted in the Writing Peers Program to tutor in the Writing Center.

I learned quickly the thought of tutoring ESL students intimidates new writing fellows. Sweaty palms, shaky hands and blushing are typical side effects for the new tutor who worries if the ESL student understands the concepts explained in the tutorial. Most foreign students are also nervous during the tutorial; therefore, the tutor needs to accommodate the tutee in the most flexible way. Since I am an ESL student tutoring in the Writing Center, I observed different strategies which need to be applied with native speakers — especially ESL students. These strategies contribute to the successfulness of the tutorial, serving the student's needs.

When tutoring, I shift from thinking like a tutor to thinking about how a typical ESL student might think provided it's an ESL tutorial. The purpose of this "mental change" is to visualize if the strategy being applied functions

in a successful way. One strategy that I use with most ESL students when the tutorial begins is watching for the body language, facial expressions, and hand gestures. It helps to "read" the signs of comfort or discomfort on a student's face when beginning a tutorial. The ESL student can hear the explanations or answers to the questions the student has asked, and at the same time I watch his/her facial expressions to see whether he/she understood the explanation or not. A flicker of hope ignites within me when I diagnose the ESL student's body language correctly.

Using markers is an excellent device that was introduced to me by my seminar professor. Some ESL students learn concepts better by visualizing their ideas with the aid of color. For the English composition course, every student has to write a paper after reading an article and take a stand on one of the issues expressed in that particular article. For example, if a Chinese student, Xing, comes to the Writing Center to receive feedback on his paper, I would rather work with markers if the student needs to "see" balance between personal voice and direct quotes used from the article. Xing would highlight only his opinion in blue for example, and all the direct quotes in yellow.

Showing how focus within a paper has shifted can also be demonstrated with markers. One peer tutor expressed his concern that markers are used in kindergarten; however, after he tried them, even he was convinced of the result during his tutorial. Using bright markers teaches foreign students focus in an enjoyable and applicable way. When Etaniel could not "see" that his

focus has changed, I resorted to my friends, the bright markers. After Etaniel finished highlighting, he admitted that his paper was composed of more green than yellow; therefore, the focus dilemma was taken care for that particular tutorial.

Illustrating pictures helps ESL students to understand the meaning of words or phrases that I use often enough. The funnel drawing is one method which is not a difficult concept since almost everybody is familiar with the kitchen tool, the funnel. If I want to dilute some vinegar, I add water with the aid of a funnel so I will not spill the liquid on the floor. The funnel concept can be applied with audience. For example, if Ramona tells me that her audience is people, I will draw the funnel and place the word people at the top. I then go ahead and explain to her that it would be a good idea if her audience would be narrower just like the tip of the funnel. This particular method of using the funnel picture is a strategy which can be applied with ESL students who like to learn methods by viewing drawings.

One other strategy that I use with an ESL student is writing out his/her unclear sentence on another scrap sheet. This method can be applied when addressing clarity. I turn his paper upside down and ask the student to rewrite the exact same sentence on scrap paper. The tutee then rephrases the same statement in a more clear, understandable sentence which will be usually be revised in a more logical way. Being able to visualize the sentence by itself, the student can concentrate and verbalize and revise the meaning in a more clear manner.

Watching body language, rewriting unclear fragments on separate sheets, resorting to markers, and drawing pictures such as the funnel are useful devices to be applied during an ESL tutorial. Being an ESL student myself, I realize how important it is to apply some of those techniques because ESL students can be shown examples (where they could visualize them) and not just told an explanation. Being aware of some strategies you could apply with ESL students allows intimidation to decrease and confidence levels to increase. Remember: everyone smiles in the *same* language.

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Indianapolis, IN

Philosophical warming trend

We began working as Writing Consultants in winter, in the midst of a bitter cold spell. Unfortunately, it was not the weather that was frigid, but rather, the student body. They were displeased with recent policy changes in the Writing Center's operational philosophy, and they did not miss any opportunity to display their displeasure. Students would approach the Center's doors with extreme caution, as if something evil lurked inside, equal parts terrifying and incomprehensible. Our marketing visits to classrooms to promulgate the Center's services were met with stinging scowls of resentment. The students would sit uneasily in their desks, twitching like cornered badgers, waiting for us to commit the ultimate writing service sacrilege, giving them license to bare their teeth and attack. ". . . and one thing the Writing Center can't do is proofread your papers for you, although we can show you some proofreading strategies. . . ." Critical mass. "What good are you, then?" students would cry out indignantly. "Why have a writing center if you won't even check our papers?" "The last Writing

Center Director that was here let us drop off our papers, and we could pick them up after he proofread them. Why are you trying to make everything more difficult?"

The students' concerns were poignant and heartfelt, but they represented a short sighted view of the Writing Center and the writing process. The problems with this type of approach were many. One problem was that the corrections were made by someone other than the writer which raises the question of authorship. If someone fixes a couple of misplaced commas, it may not be a big problem, but at what point does someone else's editing become someone else's writing?

Proofreading also removes the responsibility for the writing from the writer and places it on the proofreader's shoulders. The problem here is that we tend not to devote as much care to those things for which we are not responsible. Writing is supposed to be the sharing of our ideas with others, but if a writer surrenders responsibility for the ideas he or she is espousing, then the writing will reflect that lack of commitment. This results in the meaning being diminished, along with the potential value of the learning which might have taken place if the writer had remained fully responsible for the meaning he or she attempted to communicate.

Another problem with someone else making the corrections is that the writer is not a participant in the correction. Someone else found the mistake and someone else fixed it. The writer has not learned to find or fix his or her own mistakes in this kind of situation, and because someone else is available to make the fixes for them, the writer has no incentive to learn for the future.

This lack of learning may be the biggest drawback of all to the proofreading type of service. Proofreading simply allows the proofreader to practice his or her own skills. There is no exchange of knowledge, no instruction,

no conversation about meaning, or intent, or organization which might enable the writer to improve his or her skills. Without the interaction between writer and reader that a consultation provides, there are no insights gained about how the writer's message has been received. The A Ha! moments when a writer realizes he or she left out something important, or made an assumption that the reader might not, or discovers some glaring contradiction in reasoning will only rarely happen without the give and take of the dialogue about meaning that occurs during a consultation.

As new customers slowly trickled in, we tried to convince them that the old way had been limiting, but many continued to question the value of a face-to-face consultation with a reader. For many writers we simply had to try to explain ourselves while acknowledging their concerns. We followed this with an invitation to try our kind of consultation and judge for themselves if they learned anything of value. A few brave souls tried us out, and the dialogue between us began.

This dialogue about meaning helped make the organization of a paper, or lack of organization, visible. It helped to sharpen dull ideas and pointed out places where minimal foundation had been provided for towering ideas. It helped writers to discover where their own thinking was unfinished, or where they had settled for stock ideas rather than advancing their own thinking.

After the writer addressed the issues of meaning, organization, and development and support of ideas during our consultations, he or she was in a better position to make choices about the smaller issues of word choice, verb tense, and punctuation. At this point, language could be used by the writer to serve his or her meaning, and the writer retained authorship and responsibility. He or she remained active in the revision process and participated in

Preparation

Everything I attempt in my three-credit, semester-long course, Training for Writing Tutors, boils down to two main objectives: (1) preparing students for collaborative work with writers, and (2) preparing them to be true professionals.

I accomplish these goals by following the advice I give to tutors: talk less, listen more. Many questions arise during the training course, which includes an apprenticeship to an experienced tutor in the writing center. I have learned not to hand these prospective tutors answers but to encourage them to write their way to their own answers. I want them to be makers of knowledge in the field, not just recipients of knowledge. That means the essays they write for the course should not be simply a regurgitation of the text, readings, and class discussions. The A's and B's go to those who make a personal connection and bring new insight to the issue.

A paraphrase of May Sarton's statement about writing poetry is the nub of it: a good piece of writing grows out of a question that you need to answer for yourself. The questions about tutoring, as about any field, have not all been answered. I impress upon my students that they are part of the continuing search for answers and that their insights are important.

This works, of course, only if I am part of the process myself. Professionals continually read, write, observe, practice, and discuss in their fields. I need to do these things just as much as my tutors do, both while they are being trained and while they are working as tutors. Many of my articles which eventually are published begin as I write along with the students in my tutoring class. As all of us read our works-in-progress, we see how writing originates at points of confusion, con-tradiction, and surprise. Our best writing happens as we struggle toward clarity on issues important to us.

After fifteen years in the field, I continue to encounter questions that I need to answer for myself: How can we answer in a practical and principled way the ubiquitous question, "Can you proofread this for me?" ("Helping Students to Proofread"). What should we do about tutoring sessions that flounder? ("Letter to New Writing Tutors"). How can we clarify the understanding of faculty of what we do in the writing center? ("Expectations," "Your Piece or Mine: How Writing Tutors Work"). I didn't have immediate answers to any of these questions. Clarity and direction evolved as I persisted through the drafting process.

I noticed the counterproductive tendencies of untrained tutors—focusing on lower order concerns, ferreting out all the errors they can spot, and dominating the talking—long before I developed, through writing, ways to counteract these tendencies with effective training ("Untrained Tutors"). Until I wrote my way to an answer, I was flummoxed by the question of one of my tutors: the paradox of claiming to move writers to independence while encouraging all writers to come to us ("Something for Everyone"). Another tutor, a young man who strongly resisted the non-directive, questioning style of tutoring that I teach, led me to contemplate what are the essential attributes of tutors and what things can be left open to varieties of personality, talents, and background ("The *Sine Qua Non* for Writing Tutors").

A colleague asked me to talk with the tutors in an academic support program at our college who had been criticized by a faculty member for essentially rewriting students' papers. Their question: "Well, if we can't correct the errors, what CAN we do with ESL writers?" The colleague, also a close friend, jokes that I never know what I think about anything until I write about it for awhile. That was certainly true in this case ("ESL Quandary"). A quotation which I have seen attributed to both E.M. Forster and Flannery O'Connor expresses it nicely: "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"

Some tutors come to find this idea of writing as discovery as appealing and productive as I do. A tutor named Jeannine, troubled by the dependence on tutoring that she noticed in some writers who came to the center, struggled through many drafts until she produced an illuminating essay. It grew into a presentation, "Rehabilitating the Writing Center Junkie," at the Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. The piece was later published in the *Writing Lab Newsletter.* Recently it was chosen for inclusion in a book on training writing tutors by Toni-Lee Caposella.

Other tutoring students have written essays for the course that developed into presentations and publications. Those that do not achieve such public success still contribute to the learning of the writer, their classmates, and me when the essays are read and discussed in class. When these students become tutors, they are ready to take a professional, problem-solving approach to the task and to continue to enlighten themselves and others.

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Philosophical warming trend

the discovery, and subsequent strengthening, of weaknesses in the writing. Most importantly of all, the writer learned something about writing which would help him or her not just with this paper, but on all future writing.

It has been over a year since the Writing Center first implemented its new philosophy, and much of the anger and trepidation have dissipated from the student body. The word has slowly spread throughout the campus that the Writing Center's new approach was not implemented solely to torture students, but that it actually has many of the benefits we had described. Many of the first brave souls who dared to give us a chance in the beginning became loyal patrons and much needed endorsers. As they recommended our services to their friends, more and more students began to come to the Writing Center. The chill is out of the air now when we visit classrooms, and many students believe our new philosophy has made them exactly what a writing center should—better writers.

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NWCA News from Al DeCiccio, President

In this issue, you know that serious planning has begun for "Writing Center 2000: Meeting the Challenges of the New Century," The National Writing Centers Association and East Central Writing Centers Association Conference, to be held April 15-17 at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. I hope many of you can participate in what will be our fourth conference. As a participant in the previous three conferences, I can assure you that the experience will be enriching professionally and personally.

While you plan your proposal for "Writing Center 2000," let me remind you that there will be an Active Writing Center and exhibit booth in the exhibition area for the upcoming NCTE conference in Nashville, November 20-22. Members of the NWCA Executive Board will be among those staffing the Center. Also, the Special Interest Group Business Meeting will be held in Nashville on Saturday, November 21, 5:30-6:30. In addition to the change in presidents I wrote about last month, there will be discussion of issues—most likely including writing center accreditation.

Second Vice President Michael Pemberton has informed the Executive Board that the Special Interest Group Business Meeting for the CCCC conference in Atlanta will take place on Friday, March 26. The topic for the SIG is "Charting New Directions in Writing Center Research," and the speakers who will begin the discussion are Nancy Grimm, Eric Hobson, and Beth Boquet.

First Vice President Eric Hobson is working with Anna Challenger, founder of the European Writing Centers Association (EWCA), on plans for the first International/European Writing Centers Association (IWCA) conference to take place in the summer of 2000. Because NCTE will be holding its international conference in Utrecht, The Netherlands, at the University of Amsterdam-Utrecht in August 2000, there is a possibility of an alliance between NWCA/EWCA and NCTE that would result in an international NCTE conference with a very prominent writing center presence. I will keep the membership apprised of developments as they unfold.

All of this activity is indicative of just how robust NWCA has become. Many thanks to all of you who do so much to maintain and to advance the organization.

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WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Mediating between students and faculty

Tutors in the writing center are in unique positions institutionally and contextually. They sit, as it were, in a relatively neutral yet not completely unbiased space between students and faculty, sometimes working as surrogate teachers, sometimes mediating between instructor demands and student interests (Delaney, et al.). Belinda Droll has referred to instructors as the invisible "third force" in writing center conferences, and it is easy to understand why this might be so. If tutors work in an academic context and accept as part of their mission that they must help students to write papers that will best meet the needs of their instructors, courses, and assignments, then the instructor's agenda necessarily constitutes an important part of the context that tutors must consider when providing help. Written texts must always be measured against the requirements mandated by the assignment, the evaluative criteria used by the instructor, the focus of the class, and the discourse conventions of the particular discipline. Droll, in fact, strongly advocates "taking the practical position that teachers' expectations are a reality student writers confront daily. Thus, as one aspect of tutoring, we should help students improve those rhetorical elements of their writing which their professors most value" (2). Even under the best of circumstances, though, tutors can only be privy to a small portion of this information, and this will limit both the *quantity* and the *quality* of the assistance they are able to provide. One of the most critical and necessary skills tutors must develop is how to know when they are out of their depth — when they are being asked to provide information and assistance that, by rights, only the instructor can give, or when they are being asked to make assessments about the quality of instruction/writing assignments/coursework in a given class that they are not in an ethical position to make.

Assignment Sheets

Tutors are asked to mediate between instructors and students in several different ways in writing conferences, and some of these ways are far more fraught with peril than others. One of the most common ways which tutors work as mediators is through *assignment sheets*, and the quality of these assignments many times determines the quality of the assistance that tutors can provide. On the one hand, assignment sheets can be extremely useful in conferences. They often describe the nature and expectations for the assignment, and they provide a reasonably clear set of criteria for judging whether or not a given piece of student writing is meeting those expectations. At their best, then, assignment sheets provide both a context for the tutorial and a structure for discussing student drafts. If, for example, an assignment for a course in economic policy specifies that all papers must include a historical context for the chosen policy problem in the introduction, a three-step analysis of the problem being addressed in the body, and a recommended set of solutions to the policy problem in the conclusion, then tutors can use the assignment sheet as a model for the developing text. Does the student paper contain all of these required parts? Which are missing? Which need further development? What other clues in the assignment point to features which should appear in the final draft?

On the other hand, not all assignment sheets are useful, well designed, or well considered. What are tutors to do when they encounter absolutely horrible assignments, assignments that are poorly constructed or disturbingly vague, assignments that leave students either completely confused or thoroughly intimidated? Should they try to gloss over the problems with the assignment and attempt to work with it the best they can? Should they be honest with the student about the weaknesses or limitations they see in the assignment? Should they avoid any attempt to interpret the assignment altogether and refer the student back to the instructor for clarification? And what are the consequences of each of these actions? Do we earn student mistrust? Faculty mistrust? When should we share our opinions of assignments with students, and when would we be best advised to withhold our opinions? No matter which course of action we choose, there are likely to be a number of unpleasant trade-offs (Harris "Solutions" 65-6).

At the University of Illinois, there are some assignments that have become legendary in their awfulness, and they have also become a sort of repulsive tradition that gets passed down in the writing center from year to year and tutor to tutor. The instructors who give these assignments have never, apparently, thought about changing them, so we continue to see new students from the same courses, semester after semester, all baffled in more or less the same way. Though I don't wish to reveal the specifics of these assignments in a public forum such as this, I can say that one of them has been dubbed the "Oedipus Yecch!" paper. Students are asked to identify one of the controversial issues addressed in the play "Oedipus Rex" and discuss how different characters debate the issue from various viewpoints as the play progresses. And, oh yes, students are specifically prohibited from quoting any of the lines in the

play in their discussion. You would not believe the frustrations tutors and students have in conferences trying to find ways to talk about what the characters said without actually *saying* what the characters said. But what else can we do? Complaining to the instructor about the problems we have working with this assignment is not likely to earn us anything more than resentment and scorn. And a week-long summer workshop on WAC principles and assignment design (which this instructor participated in) did not lead to any significant alterations in "Oedipus Yecch!" either. Our current strategy is to bite the metaphorical bullet, work with the students as best we can, and make a point of directing them to the instructor for further advice. If enough students make enough noise about the assignment, we hope it will eventually get modified.

Instructor Commentary

Muriel Harris has referred to the ghastly paper topics we sometimes see in writing centers as "Assignments from Hell" ("Avoiding AFH's"), and they can certainly be hellacious to deal with. But coping with bad assignments is nowhere near as problematic or anxiety-producing as having to explain *instructor comments* on student papers. While we can finesse student questions about assignments and deflect questions about an assignment's relative merit with the statement, "It's not really my job to comment on the assignment you've been given. It's my job to help you fulfill it the best I possibly can," we don't really have that option when students ask us to interpret — and thereby reflect on the value of — their teachers' evaluative responses. When tutors examine the comments that instructors write on their students' papers, they may have just as much difficulty understanding those comments as the students. The comments may be illegible, vague, incoherent, or misguided. They may be personally biased, mean-spirited, or just plain wrong. They may be pervasive, covering every spare piece of white space on the page, or they may be extremely

sparse, giving no clue why the paper received the grade it did. And even when the commentaries seem clear and coherent, the tutor may disagree quite strongly with the instructor's "advice" or "appraisal."

What are tutors to do in such a case? How honest should they be? To what degree is it possible to separate a strict *interpretation* of instructor commentary from an *assessment* of that commentary's truth-value? When tutors decipher an instructor's words and try to put them into the context of the whole paper or of the class, students will naturally inquire whether the tutor agrees with what the instructor said. Is it really fair and ethical to dodge the question and say, "I can't really comment on that. It's obviously what your instructor thinks, and if you want to do well in the class, then we'll need to make sure that the paper conforms to his/her wishes"? Or, should tutors be honest with students, offer their opinions ("Personally, I don't see anything wrong with the sentence the way you've written it."), and hedge those opinions with qualifications about instructor preferences and/or disciplinary discourse?

Instructor Stance

A similar set of questions must be considered when tutors become aware (or when students tell them) that a particular instructor has a very strong point of view about some issue and is "likely" to reward students who share that point of view. Should tutors encourage students to follow the instructor's "party line," even if the students don't believe it themselves, or should they encourage students to hold firm to their beliefs, even if the expression of those beliefs might result in a lower grade? (Admittedly, many students believe that their role in the classroom is to "psych out" the instructor's views and try to reflect them whenever possible. They feel that doing so is their guarantee of a good grade in the class, and they sometimes have difficulty accepting assurances from tutors — and even the instructors

themselves — that the grade a paper receives will be independent of the argumentative stance the writer adopts. Most of the time, therefore, assertions of instructor bias will be unfounded — but not always!) Though few instructors will be quite so blatant and vocal about their prejudices as the whacked-out political science teacher played by Sam Kinison in the Rodney Dangerfield movie "Back to School," we must also realize that academics frequently have a good deal of intellectual and professional capital invested in their epistemologies. Cognitive psychologists are not likely to be sympathetic to student papers written from a behaviorist viewpoint, and New Historicist critics will probably take great pleasure in pointing out the "flaws" in a student's deconstructionist reading of *Jane Austen*. If and when we become aware of this possible conflict, where do our responsibilities lie?

As in a number of my more recent columns, what follows are a few hypothetical scenarios that outline some basic contexts for the issues I've raised here. How would you respond to these situations in your writing center, both pedagogically (in terms of your interactions with the text) and personally (in terms of your interaction with the student)?

1) A student in a second year composition course brings in a paper that her instructor — a tenured member of the English faculty — has commented on and returned to her. The student is upset, and one look at her paper indicates why. Of the five pages in the draft, virtually all are covered with voluminous comments in red ink. Marginal comments are directed to both local and global issues, sometimes asking pointed questions, sometimes directing her to additional sources, sometimes suggesting options for revision. The instructor has also crossed out numerous parts of the text and rewritten them himself, in one case rewriting an entire paragraph of the student's paper. None of the comments seem mean-spirited, but very little of the writer's original

text has emerged unscathed. The final comment (with a grade of "D") asks the student to rewrite the paper.

2) Several students you have seen from a particular instructor's class have shown you graded papers with commentaries that sharply attack the students' theses, organization, development, and support. The following comments are typical: "This paragraph is completely illogical and incoherent." "It seems clear that you either did no research on this topic or have no idea what research is." "What in the world were you thinking about here? This doesn't make any sense." "This is a stupid argument; nobody really considers this a possibility."

3) Several students you have seen from a particular instructor's class have shown you graded papers with sharply personal attacks in the commentaries. The following comments are typical: "How in the world did you get into this school anyway?" "You must be really stupid if you expect me to believe this."

"Have you forgotten how to use your brain? Try looking up the word 'logic' in the dictionary sometime." "This is the most pitiful excuse for a paper I've ever seen. I'm not sure you have the ability to make it in this class, much less college."

4) Several students you have seen from an instructor's second year composition class have shown you graded papers with commentaries that make clear he has a clear political agenda and will brook no views that do not resonate with his own. Virtually all the readings in the course focus on a single topic from a single point of view (cultural studies/neo-conservatism/pedagogy of the oppressed/gender issues/gay and lesbian studies/fundamentalist Christianity/pick your favorite ideology), and students who take issue with the readings or the perspectives they advance are uniformly graded down, regardless of the quality of their arguments or their writing. They are about to write their next paper and want your

advice about whether they should "tow the party line" or continue to write about the way they really feel.

Michael A. Pemberton
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