THE WRITING LAB

NEWSLETTER

Volume 27, Number 2 Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing October, 2002

...FROM THE EDITOR...

As you may have noticed in recent issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, an increasing number of institutions are advertising for writing center directors. And reports from some institutions indicate a scarcity of experienced and/or qualified candidates—which points to the need to train more people to step into these jobs. And while some graduate programs offer graduate courses in writing center administration, a new institute will be held next summer to meet the need for an intensive focus on writing center direction. On page 9, you'll see an announcement for this institute, and their Web site will soon offer more information.

This issue of the newsletter also includes D'Ann George's reflections on the politics of proposing a new course in tutor training, and Rachel Perkes summarizes for us what she learned about the number of hours writing centers are open for operation. Other articles offer new approaches to perennial topics: Adar Cohen explores the use of improv games in tutoring; Steven Corbett gives us excellent suggestions for visits to classrooms to explain our services, and Rebecca Day introduces us to another model for how people learn.

• *Muriel Harris, editor*

...INSIDE...

Lobbying for New Courses in Writing Center Theory/ Pedagogy
• **D'Ann George** 1

From Stage to Page: Using Improvisational Acting to Cultivate Confidence in Writers
• **Adar Cohen** 6

Tutors' Column:
"The Role of the Emissary: Helping to Bridge the Communication Canyon Between Instructors and Students"
• **Steven J. Corbett** 10

Conference Calendar 11

Writing Center Hours of Operation: What Influences Them?
• **Rachel B. Perkes** 12

Viewing Writing Centers through Brian Cambourne's Model of Learning
• **Rebecca Day** 13

Lobbying for new courses in writing center theory/ pedagogy

For the past two years, I have collected stories about the genesis of courses in writing center theory and pedagogy. Initially I hoped only to glean for grains of wisdom that would help me push my own proposal through what I thought was a particularly unreceptive curriculum committee at my home institution. But as I exchanged stories with colleagues on WCenter, I realized my difficulties were not unique. Curriculum committee members, department chairs, and deans are just a few of the people whose support we must solicit when proposing new courses. This essay synthesizes and reflects on interviews with fifteen writing center colleagues concerning their course proposal processes, as well as my own experience. While our experiences were greatly determined by institutional contexts, I'm highlighting here patterns I saw across institutions and advice that will apply to many scenarios.

Politics and allies

Almost the moment I set foot on the campus where I now direct a writing center, I began designing a syllabus for a

new course to train writing center staff, which I quickly proposed at one of the first meetings of the writing committee. I would later regret my haste and wish I had spent more time getting to know my new colleagues and the campus culture before proposing something new. I wrongly (though perhaps reasonably) assumed that because I had mentioned a new course for peer tutors in my job interview, I somehow had a mandate for a course and didn't need to waste time crafting a rationale my colleagues would accept.

The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, published in ten monthly issues from September to June by the Department of English, Purdue University, is a publication of the International Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement.ISSN 1040-3779. All Rights and Title reserved unless permission is granted by Purdue University. Material will not be reproduced in any form without express written permission.

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Subscriptions: The newsletter has no billing procedures. Yearly payments of $15 (U.S. $20 in Canada) are requested, and checks must be received four weeks prior to the month of expiration to ensure that subscribers do not miss an issue. Please make checks payable to Purdue University and send to the Managing Editor. Prepayment is requested for all subscriptions.

Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is 10-15 double-spaced typed pages, 3-5 pages for reviews, and 4 pages for the Tutors' Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. If possible, please send as attached files or as cut-and-paste in an e-mail to mjturley@purdue.edu. Otherwise, send a 3 and 1/2 in. disk with the file, along with the paper copy. Please enclose a self-addressed envelope with return postage not pasted to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 45 days prior to the month of issue (e.g. August 15 for October issue).

Many of my colleagues acknowledge suffering from similar symptoms of political myopia. Deborah Martinson (Occidental College), for example, admits excitedly blurting out her ideas for a course at a meeting when the committee chair asked if anyone had plans for a new course. Later, after several people raised questions for which she had no prepared answers, she had to backtrack. It was then she realized the course sounded too much like an imported product and not an answer to a genuine institutional need. It would have been more politic for her and writing center co-director Tom Burkdall to solicit colleagues for their ideas about what writing tutors needed to know and then to position the course as, at least in part, a response to their perceptions.

At Bristol Community College, Howard Tinberg's mindset was likewise an obstacle keeping him from becoming more politic. When he first proposed his course to the divisional curriculum committee, he was thinking primarily about the advantages of a course for the lab and for himself as WPA. With a course, he could train tutors much more efficiently and systematically. He could expect them to show up for meetings having read assigned articles. Believing that others would yield to his claims of expertise on the best way to run a writing center, he wrongly assumed a rubber stamp of his proposal.

The experiences of Tinberg, Martinson and myself demonstrate that developing good relationships with people in power on your campus lays necessary groundwork for any kind of curricular change or program development you will eventually do, whether or not you think your proposal controversial. Without strong advocates in a key department or committee, you may not be able to proceed to the next level of governance. Or you may not recognize the course you proposed after a committee edits the description and rationale.

For writing center administrators who are not members of an academic department, finding allies for a proposal can prove exceptionally difficult. Jim Bell, a full-time staff member at the University of Northern British Columbia, found he wasn't even invited to the department or senate meetings where his proposal for a course was discussed. Perhaps because he couldn't advocate for his own cause, the English department took two minutes to reject his proposal. Unwilling to give up, Bell shopped his proposal around, taking it next to the psychology department, where the course found a willing buyer but with a heavy discount: they wanted to teach the course themselves after Bell taught it one semester. He next tried the department of education, where they turned his proposal into a course in "individualized instruction methods," suitable for a wide range of teachers-in-training at the expense of a focus on writing.

Though you may face an uphill battle for course approval without faculty status, you can increase your chance for success by seeking natural allies among faculty who share a strong commitment to undergraduate teaching and feel they benefit from writing center services. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for example, the best advocate for Brad Hughes' course—beyond faculty within the English department— proved to be a history professor who already believed in the importance of writing-intensive courses and understood how well-trained writing center consultants support them at institutions like Brown and Yale. Similarly, members of the chemistry department who at first opposed Martinson's course became strong advocates after she showed them that 46% of students in their courses had used the writing center.

Michele Eodice's experience, on the other hand, demonstrates that some of the best allies are not natural but cultivated. At the University of Kansas, she

won the support of an assistant dean by asking him for feedback on her course proposal before she submitted it to any committee. She thinks he felt flattered because her request seemed to indicate he played a pivotal role on campus. From this successful experience, Eodice learned that support for a course—and for a writing center itself—requires deliberate networking.

Joan Mullin (University of Toledo) advises that full-time staff not only seek and cultivate allies among the faculty but that they begin to act like members of the faculty in order to improve their ethos. Her own efforts to bolster her credibility began with a request that the University evaluate her according to standards for faculty members even though she was officially staff. She then devoted herself to scholarly research, campus involvement, and the teaching of challenging courses. When she proposed the first course in writing theory, she had the stature on campus to argue for it successfully. Eventually her faculty-like vita helped her to join the professorial ranks as a member of the English department.

Even with support from faculty, you will want to seek allies within the administration on your campus. Gerry Fisher, a full-time staff member at Washington College, found a sponsor for her course proposal in the education department but didn't stop her lobbying there. Instead, she obtained additional endorsements from the study skills center, math center, library, and the career development center, all of which helped her gain approval for her course from the all-college curriculum committee.

Institutional missions, myths and methods

Gaining support will be easier if you can position your course to meet one or more institutional goals described in your college's mission statement, presidential addresses, or other official documents that claim to speak to the college's overall vision with regard to undergraduate (or graduate) education. Look for an emphasis on literacy, writing, communication, or workplace skills, advises Jean Timpel (Concordia University—Wisconsin), and then argue that your course enhances students' knowledge in these areas.

Another way to attach your course to the coat tails of your college's mission is to look for existing programs that already have some momentum on campus. Tinberg, for example, positioned his course as both a service learning opportunity and an offering through the honors program. Similarly, when Hughes proposed his course for undergraduate writing fellows, he saw a strong connection between his goals for the course and a new Pathways to Excellence Program that would attempt to involve undergraduates in research and teaching initiatives. In almost all the discussions and oral presentations about the course, he emphasized that link.

In addition to looking at stated goals and existing programs, consider whether faculty and administrators at your institution circulate any myths about the nature of the student population, or the history of the school, or the school's identity that might prove favorable to your cause. For example, many of Martinson's colleagues believed that the college's mission was to train undergraduates for graduate school and professional work through a "writing centered" approach, so she argued that a truly writing-intensive curriculum required a first-class, state-of-the art writing center, which of course meant a rigorously trained staff.

Institutional lore can help you to move your proposal forward, or it can prove a real obstacle, as when it shrouds procedures for proposing new courses. Such procedures may be straightforward and clearly explained in an official document at your institution, but at some schools they exist only in the unreliable memories of colleagues and administrators. Both Beth Young (University of Central Florida), and Sally Joranko (John Carroll University), for example, had a difficult time figuring out how, when, and to whom to submit proposal materials. Both advise asking several different authorities on your campus about proposal procedures, and getting answers in writing. If a source is vague, says Young, ask follow-up questions: What is the first step? When are the due dates? What materials will the committee need? How long will each step of the process take?

If you fail to grasp procedures for proposing a course, you may find that your proposal takes much longer than you think to gain approval, or that it stalls somewhere in the process. Bruce Pegg, for example, found that proposals went from the sponsoring department to a dean's advisory council, from which they would return, rejected, with no rationale for the disapproval. If he had learned about this process earlier, he could have scouted members of the advisory council in advance and made sure that at least one felt accountable to him for the decision concerning his proposal.

Perceptions

Your biggest obstacle to getting a course in writing center theory/pedagogy on the books may be your colleagues' doubts about the academic merit of the course. Both Martinson and Burkdall, for example, had been hired to co-direct the Writing Center and as writing specialists. Martinson reports that there was a widely held perception that she and Tom were "writing people" and therefore skill purveyors. The course, people wrong assumed, would teach basic skills rather than subject matter more typically taught in a small liberal arts college. Similarly, Pegg's proposal for a course never got past his small writing department because members feared it

sounded too vocational for a liberal college. Pegg felt they were buying into a university mentality about courses in pedagogy, but he was none-theless unable to overcome their self-defeating attitudes.

At Highline Community College, a few members of the English depart-ment questioned the academic validity of the "Tutor Training Practicum" that Rosemary Adang proposed, but they had stronger objections. The tutoring center had just begun to offer a general strategies course, and some thought that Adang's course was therefore un-necessary. Similarly, at Salt Lake Community College, mid-level admin-istrators told Clint Gardner that his course wasn't needed because the Learning Center already offered a course in general tutoring strategies. Gardner tried unsuccessfully to argue that the cognitive activities in the writ-ing center were different from those in other parts of the LC. Looking back on his failed bid for a course, Gardner wishes he had argued for the academic merits of his course, rather than argu-ing for its merits as a vehicle to train tutors.

Gardner's advice to focus on the aca-demic merit of the course, rather than the usefulness of the course in training staff for the writing center, can help you to rebut a wide range of possible objects to your proposal. For example, at both Bristol CC and Highline CC, English department members (some of them writing specialists) wrongly as-sumed that community college stu-dents wouldn't be successful writing tutors. Rather than responding with an argument for students' tutoring capa-bilities, however, Tinberg and Adang built a writing-intensive component into the course, focusing their proposal instead on what students would learn in the course that would enhance their education.

Separating the work of students in the course from the work of tutors in the center can also be crucial when it comes to arguing for the academic merits of the course. At Emory and Henry College, for example, the Aca-demic Policies Committee canned Felicia Mitchell's course because, some reasoned, education majors get credit for student teaching but no pay. Why should writing center tutors get both course credit and pay, they asked. Looking back on her failed bid, Mitchell wishes she had been more careful to distinguish differences be-tween what students do and learn while tutoring versus what they do and learn as part of the course.

Researching courses at other institu-tions should help you not only to build a stronger course but also to define the academic content of the course in a way that colleagues on your campus will accept. If your school is a commu-nity college, for example, collect syl-labi from other two-year schools, and discuss the how these model courses have defined abstract concepts like "writing center theory" and "writing center pedagogy." Or if your school is an elite liberal arts college (or aspires to be one), consider modeling your course, at least in part, on those at other elite liberal arts colleges like Wellesley and Colgate. Remember that different institutions, and even differ-ent colleagues within institutions, may have different standards for what counts as academic content or rigor. Be willing to listen to your colleagues' concerns and prepared to point to simi-lar institutions where course content includes such topics as collaborative learning theory or critical pedagogy.

Language choices

As you write your official proposal and prepare to talk with campus deci-sion makers about your course, con-sider carefully the language that will describe what you want to do and what students will do. Don't assume a friendly audience who shares the per-spective of writing center professionals on the importance of formal training for tutors. Likewise, don't assume an audience comfortable with discipline-specific language for describing what students can learn from working in and theorizing about writing centers. The discourse of writing center circles tends to over-represent the part of our work that involves training in practical strategies and under-represent more traditional academic concerns, like theories of writing or learning. Don't even assume your colleagues will auto-matically accept course titles that are on the books at other institutions.

For example, when Pegg titled his course "Composition Theory and Prac-tice," an innocent-sounding title, writ-ing department members objected to the word "practice" in the title. He speculates they were following the lead of the education department at Colgate, which emphasizes theory but not hands-on practice. Still, Pegg found their objection baffling since writing courses in his department emphasize practice.

Objections to the word "practice" are not uncommon, however. The Dean of Arts & Sciences at first objected to Bell's course because it was "too prac-tical." Quick on his feet, Bell sug-gested that instead of practical matters, the course begin with Aristotle and fo-cus on the "Philosophy of Writing." With this more elevated language, the Dean bought in. Similarly, Martinson believes a course title or description that included the words "practice," "tu-toring" or "training" would never have passed at her small, liberal arts college. Her title: "Theory and Pedagogy of Writing."

Young recommends language that makes the course sound like typical academic work, though she wasn't al-ways so careful. When she first began working with graduate students, they resented having to attend her "training meetings." But after she began calling them "seminars," the next group of grad students was more cooperative. In

another savvy rhetorical move, she began to call observations "professional development projects." The word "training" still exists in her professional lexicon, but she is careful to pull it out in the right context—for example, in a promo advertising the center's services to students.

Timpel was careful not to use the word "tutor" in her course title, a move that reflects her emphasis on how the course is valuable to students, rather than the writing center. Since Concordia is a private Lutheran school with popular tracks in pastoral ministry and teaching, she stressed that students in her course would learn consulting and oral presentation skills, which both have broad application to these professions.

Similarly, when I first showed my course description and syllabus to a departmental committee, the title read "Peer Tutor Training." Naively, I thought that a descriptive title was all that was called for, but not only did my colleagues doubt the intellectual rigor of a course in "tutor training," they also cited a rule against college credit for any work related to a campus job. My revised title read "Writing Conference Strategies," but as I began to think about the course as part of the larger curriculum, even this title began to sound too narrow—too focused on the actual job of working in the writing center. With a title like that, neither students nor faculty could see how students would learn very broad knowledge about writing and writers that could apply to a variety of scenarios in and out of the academy.

Back doors

You may be able to avoid an obstructive curriculum committee if you can co-opt a course that already exists. At Coe College, Bob Marrs co-opted a class called Process in Writing, a course that had originally consisted of a 30-minute conference between instructor and student and had nothing to do with preparing tutors to work in a writing center. The advantage of co-opting an existing course, says Marrs, is that it is easier to argue for a proven track record of something you are already doing successfully than to argue you will do something well in the future if given the chance.

Chloe Diepenbrock co-opted a course from the communications department called "Undergraduate Practicum," but says her experience taught her that it may be worth it in the end to fight your way into the curriculum through the front door rather than the back. Though tutors in her campus do take a course, Chloe teaches it as an overload without extra compensation. To make matters worse, reviewers of her third-year application for promotion claimed her writing center articles and conference presentations were service, not scholarship. She feels the problem on her campus is one of lack of respect for what writing center directors do. My question about her experience: would her colleagues be less in the dark about the value of her work had she argued for the place of her course in the undergraduate curriculum rather than co-opting an existing course?

As we argue for the place of our courses in the curriculum, we do more than attempt to make our administrative task easier. We also do more than attempt to provide systematic, rigorous training for peer writing consultants. When we argue that a course in writing center theory and pedagogy should exist on our campuses, we argue for the intellectual and academic nature of our work and that of writing consultants. Therefore, time spent talking about the course and its goals with faculty members, deans, and other members of powerful committees, isn't a waste of time. Rather, it is central to what we do. If writing centers are going to thrive, we must be good rhetoricians who consider our institutional context when we shape the language we use to propose and promote new programs and courses. We must be careful readers of our institutions and rhetors within those institutions.

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International Writing Centers Association and the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing

Call for Papers
October 23-25, 2003
Hershey, Pennsylvania
"Writing Back"
Keynote address: Rebecca Moore Howard

Proposals are invited from writing center directors, tutors (undergraduate, graduate, or professional), and teachers. Deadline for proposals is April 1, 2003. Conference Chair is Ben Rafoth, brafoth@iup.edu. For more information about the delights of visitng Hershey, Pennsylvania and the conference, visit <www.wc.iup.edu/2003conference>.

From stage to page: Using improvisational acting to cultivate confidence in writers

Me: "So, what are ways that you could develop this paragraph?"
Tutee: "Well, I could talk about the ways that children avoid their parents. —*(ding!)*— I could . . . talk about the way children stick together and drift away from their parents."
Me: "That sounds interesting. What else?"
Tutee: "I could mention how some kids move out before they are 18 —(*ding!)*—- I could mention how very few kids move out before they are —*(ding!)*— I could talk about how I moved out before I was 18."
Me: "Wow. Is that true?"
Tutee: "Yeah, that's why I am interested in this topic —*(ding!)*— that's why I want to write about this topic—*(ding!)*— that's why I want to prove that teenagers can make it on their own."

The game *Actually* is usually played with two people. The actors create a scene and engage in dialogue, which can be interrupted at any point by the bell. When it rings, the actor must change the last thing he has said, and continue to do so until the bell and its ringer are satisfied. The above improvisational game excavated some precious ideas and revealed a gem of personal experience.

Introduction to improv-tutoring

Improvisational Acting is a creative, unrehearsed artistic medium that addresses life's truths through self-expression and mindful teamwork. It is whimsical, raw, and very alive. Actors work together to establish believable scenes, characters, and conflicts with honesty and humor. As an avid Improv actor and a practicing writing tutor, I have noticed some stunning parallels between Improvisation and written communication. Everyone has been daunted by writing, by the infinite opportunities to communicate. Will the writer clarify, simplify, complicate, decorate, explain, make plain, interpret, persuade, profess, or digress? The magnitude of these decisions can weigh down the fingertips of even the most prolific authors. What about writers who lack confidence? Improvisational Acting has the ability to create and foster more confident writers, and writing tutors can be the practitioners who instigate and guide this potentially rich process.

It is safe to say that most reluctant writers are not boisterous jokesters. Many students will feel uncomfortable playing Improv games the first time they visit a writing tutor, and many tutors will be hesitant to initiate this delicate process. We should try to push through the unease, recognizing it as both a cause of the tutee's difficulties and an authentic emotion that should not be ignored. We must walk this tightrope with sensitivity and resolve. Unless the tutee is genuinely petrified, the show must go on. The discomfort is part of the medicine. Hiding behind ambiguity, wordiness, and self-censure is comfortable. Pushing through bad habits and working hard to form new ones cannot be a comfortable process.

Improv slips through the fingers of those who try to define it. Its amorphous, transformative nature evades any attempt to classify it as a theatre sport, as psycho-drama, or as impromptu comedy. However, these circumstances have not discouraged people from dipping their hands into the water and trying to grasp the slippery art form. Viola Spolin, author of the first authoritative book on the subject, *Improvisation for the Theater*, called it "a moment in the lives of people without needing a plot or story line for the communication" (384). Greg Atkins, accomplished actor and Improv guru, offers another definition. He emphasizes "the freedom of improvisation—no script, no director, nothing but a group of actors creating relationships, conflicts, dialogue, plot, songs . . . off the top of our heads" (xiii). Why is it that writers lack the confidence to do the same?

What evil forces have instilled apprehension in today's writers? How has self-doubt become an epidemic? How have vagueness and inappropriate neutrality become such common vices? Why does "the academy" encourage the composition of ornate bouquets that choke the clarity out of students' writing? These are legitimate challenges that writers of all abilities must face.

In *The Confident Writer*, Constance Gefvert outlines four of the major reasons why writing demands so much confidence. First, writing is not as natural as speaking. We talk every day, and we learned how to do so long before we articulated any of our thoughts on paper. Second, writers do not have a tangible audience to give instant and continuous feedback. Third, unlike writing, speaking is usually provisional and does not feel cast in stone. The idea that writing is permanent and irrevocable is yet another source of anxiety that diminishes confidence. Fourth, while we converse freely on any subject that pleases us, writing in the workplace and in schools is often assigned. Limiting a writer's topic to assigned drudgery will only suffocate a spirit of confidence and creativity.

But obstacles to writing with confidence are not impossible to overcome. The following are some concrete examples of how Improv games can be incorporated into tutoring sessions. It is my hope that they will assist writers in seizing their self-assurance and releasing their anxieties. Each of the examples will begin with a brief diagnosis of the writing concern, followed by a description of a particular game and an analysis of the game's ability to address the concern in question.

Apprehension: Renouncing negativity

Apprehensive writers are often reluctant "to commit themselves to a position." They dodge this necessity by "embracing neutrality" and, unfortunately, "by saying less" (Daiker 106). Donald Daiker attributes these weaknesses to the harmful effects of exclusively negative criticism. If students are to recover from the ruthless effects of the red pen, Daiker notes that praise from teachers and professors is vital for "students who have known little encouragement" (105). A crucial principle of Improv is the renunciation of destructive criticism. Praise is the protocol and is supplemented only by constructive, encouraging evaluation. Improvisational Acting has the ability to lure timid writers out of hiding by providing an environment where only one simple demand is made: that they say *something*.

The game that best persuades reluctant writers to emerge is *Word Ball*. In this game, the group stands in a circle facing each other (for this and other group games discussed in this paper, a one-on-one tutoring format will work) and one person begins by throwing the imaginary ball to another player and calling out a random word. The actor who receives the ball and the word must mime a catch and immediately throw a new word, triggered by the previous one, to another actor. This process continues, and the pauses between catches and throws should become shorter and shorter until the team achieves a level of fluidity.

Word Ball taps into the phenomenon of free-association and encourages the unrestrained generation of ideas. This game can be used with students who have difficulty generating creative alternatives to mundane words that congest their writing. *Word Ball* affirms the value of the student's ideas. If they are zany, good. If they clarify, great. If they are unique, honest, and appropriate to the piece, save them; they're priceless. This game may not put tutees at ease, but they will get used to it. The results are worth it.

Self-criticism: Resuscitating creativity

Writers who lack confidence make harsh judgments of their writing. These frustrated, pessimistic decrees usually sound something like: "I don't feel that I'm being successful with this assignment" (Taylor 25) or "it might be kind of dumb" (Newkirk 319). Improv replaces these self-conscious tendencies with a liberal reverence for any creative effort.

Reticent writers can benefit from *One-Word Story*. This game is played with as few as two people (tutor and tutee) or as many as twenty (an Improv class or troupe). For a large group, the actors sit in a circle; if only two people are playing, they should sit facing each other. The participants tell a story together, alternating one word at a time. The story shouldn't be complicated. The establishment and resolution of a conflict and the clear presence of a beginning, a middle, and an end are the only requirements. *One-Word Story* sharpens an actor's ability to move a storyline forward, organize his ideas, and vocalize his thoughts quickly and with assurance. Why wouldn't it do the same for a writer?

Mechanics: Postponing preoccupation

Many writers have snuffed out their flames of confidence by worrying about insignificant aspects of their writing. They are so preoccupied with mechanics, grammar, and spelling that they miss the precious opportunity to "engage, soar, create, discover . . . " (Bishop 45). Improv does not permit the writer to miss these opportunities. *Sound-Ball* enforces this policy. It is played exactly like *Word-Ball* except that instead of random words, the actors throw and catch spontaneous sounds. Tutors can use this game to help tutees overcome the anxieties that smother confidence. Since generating non-sensical noises in a discursive, academic context is unconventional, even unheard of, this game has the potential to cure writers of their writing fears. But if the tutee is completely uneasy about playing this game, drop it. Torturing tutees is counterproductive: it doesn't help them write better papers, and it certainly doesn't promote repeat business.

Gibberish Ball resembles *Word-Ball* and *Sound-Ball.* But instead of words or sounds, whimsical imitations of foreign, if not otherworldly, languages roll off the actors' tongues. The ball is thrown and caught as the players try to outdo each other's vocal concoctions.

Jason: *Harlda aveen mukir.*
Me: *Jalud farn yeet raspo.*
Jason: *Gleeb ornswa yutsa.*
Me: *Zarbest bankcha motriyaka.*

This game is perfect for the writer who has the tendency to deem her ideas wrong or inadequate. How can gibberish be wrong? Like other Improv games, *Gibberish Ball* salutes any creative effort and ignores the typical concerns: *Is it boring? Is it all over the place? How will it sound? Did I even do it right?* Some of these concerns are important elements of the writing process, but they become destructive when they dictate, dominate, manipulate, and subdue. *Gibberish Ball* can keep them in check by resuscitating the breath of creativity when it gets restricted.

Improv in practice

Alexis brought me a draft of the proposal she was writing for an environmental work camp in Brazil during her winter break. She was concerned with her overuse of certain words and her

supposed inability to replace them. "I can't come up with better ones," she explained, "and I get so frustrated!" Her proposal's introduction was engaging. She described the expressions she had received when she told people that she had spent her summer at a work camp: *I wonder how many crazy looks I received.* Per order of Alexis, *crazy* had to go. We played *Word Ball.* Two things were clear: the game had enormous consciousness-tapping potential, and it would be a considerable challenge for Alexis, who is shy and easily embarrassed. I began, throwing *crazy* at Alexis. She froze, smiled, and threw back *my mom.* It wasn't quite what we were after, but I continued. *Bizarre.* She paused again before protesting, "I don't see how this is supposed to work." I considered dropping it but decided to give it one last chance. "Just one more try," I pleaded casually. *Bizarre.*

Alexis: *Unique.*

Me: *Unusual.*

Alexis: *Strange.*

Me: "What do you think? Does that work?

The sentence in question was modified from *I wonder how many crazy looks I received* to *I wonder how many strange looks I received.*

This small adjustment was a big step forward for Alexis; she had overcome her frustration, and she was happy with her introduction.

Conclusion

Struggling writers will readily criticize themselves for neglecting phantom expectations. For ninety-nine percent of the students who work with me, frequent self-criticism is standard operating procedure. Nobody thinks they "did it right" and everyone is fairly certain that "it's not very good." At the core of Improvisational Acting lies an absolute disregard for what is "right." Improv boosts confidence by stimulating creativity and undermining self-criticism. Writing tutors with and without Improv experience can try these and other games with their tutees. If the improvisational ideology were applied to writing, hesitant writers might learn not to condemn their writing *during* the writing process. They might even abandon the crippling effects of self-censure.

But how else can this theoretical relationship be propelled into practice? How can the relationship's potential be harnessed? Workshops on both art forms could blend a bit of each other into their programs. Writing experts could incorporate Improv into their teaching and vice-versa. Appropriate English and Theater courses at colleges and universities could be departmentally linked to enhance the education of students studying Writing or Improv. What if more opportunities to Improvise were offered to high school, middle school, and elementary school students? What if they were granted the opportunity to experiment with and explore this fascinating realm of spontaneous, interactive theater as they developed their writing skills? The results would be magnificent.

Both arts begin with a blank canvas: a stage or a page. Wild vivid brush strokes blend with softer, subtle accents to paint a story. Soon the canvas is alive with color, texture, and meaning. The painting is no longer a canvas but a reality that provokes laughter, tears, illumination, dialogue. This painting becomes a portrait of the creator, and if she watches closely and searches deeply, her confidence will emerge from the chaos of the once-blank canvas.

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Norton, MA

Work Cited

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Call for Participation: The Writing Centers Research Project Survey of Writing Centers for AY 2001-2002

The Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) at the University of Louisville is updating the benchmark data for its longitudinal study of writing centers. The WCRP requests that all writing center directors visit its web site <www.wcrp.louisville.edu> and either complete the survey online or download a printable version to complete by hand. Two versions of the survey are available this year: one for those who

(continued on page 9)

Annual Summer Writing Center Institute

The First Annual Summer Institute for writing center directors and other professionals will be held from Sunday, July 27 (an evening welcome and reception), through Friday, August 1, 2003, in Madison, Wisconsin. The institute will offer presentations, in-depth discussions, breakout groups for special interests, and mentoring throughout the week. Topics will include:

- different models and missions for writing centers
- writing center literature and research
- tutor selection and training
- technology and writing centers
- OWLs
- assessment
- facilities and space needs
- funding and budgeting
- communication with faculty and administrators
- record-keeping
- issues and questions that participants bring to the institute

Drawn from universities of various sizes, a secondary school, and a community college, the institute's leaders represent a range of expertise within the profession. Brad Hughes (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and Paula Gillespie (Marquette University) will chair the institute. Leaders will be in residence and participate in the institute throughout the week. They include Pam Childers (The McCallie School), Muriel Harris (Purdue University), James Inman (University of South Florida), Neal Lerner (MIT), Jon Olson (Penn State University Park), and Jill Pennington (Lansing Community College).

The conference facility, Madison's Pyle Center, is a state-of-the-art facility on Lake Mendota, close to the University of Wisconsin's Writing Center, Library, Union, the conference hotel, restaurants, and shopping. The institute's board is seeking funding from several sources and will attempt to keep the costs reasonable. Mark your calendars and start seeking funding for this great new opportunity for writing center professionals! Further details and registration information will be available in October 2002 at <www.wisc.edu/writing/institute>.

Writing Center Director
Boise State University

Assistant Professor or Associate Professor of English; Director, writing center and writing across the curriculum. Tenure-track position in rhetoric and composition, beginning Fall 2003. Ph.D. required. Administrative duties include recruiting, training, and supervising undergraduate writing consultants, promoting WAC awareness and activities, maintaining a strong WAC presence on campus, and facilitating summer writing seminars for University faculty.

Teaching duties consist of two courses per semester, including a writing-consultant training course, with some graduate teaching possible. Experience in writing center or writing program administration is required. Excellence in teaching, scholarly publication, and service are required for academic advancement.

Send a letter of application and a vita to Dr. Richard K. Sanderson, Chair, Department of English, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1525. Screening will begin November 11, 2002, and continue until the position is filled. Interviews with selected candidates will be held at the MLA convention. Boise State University is an AA/EOE employer.

Research Project

(continued from page 8)

completed surveys last fall, and one for new participants. Those who responded last fall are asked to update survey items that change from year to year by completing a "Survey Update" form, which is also available at the WCRP web site. New participants are asked to complete the full version. Participants may request a hard copy of either version of the survey.

Questions about the survey or requests for hard copies should be directed to Christopher Ervin (chris.ervin@louisville.edu) or The Writing Centers Research Project, 312 Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292, (502) 852-2173. The deadline for completing the survey is Friday, November 1, 2002.

Tutors' Column

The role of the emissary: Helping to bridge the communication canyon between instructors and students

As I enter the freshman classroom, breathing heavily and wiping a sheen of sweat from my forehead, I introduce myself as Steven, a peer tutor for the English Department Writing Center: "Sorry for being so out of breath, I guess being out of shape doesn't help much." Some students laugh, others look as if they just woke up, their groggy faces unwilling to crack a smile.

Increasingly in the Writing Center we have been called to visit classrooms and discuss our services (we are primarily an undergraduate-focused center). Our current directors are reaching out to connect instructors' needs and desires for their students with the assistance from tutors that readily exists. The area between wanting to communicate and actually being able to is the abyss that separates instructors from students—a gap that takes a lot of time to understand the depth, a separation that is understood better by professors. Unfortunately, it will be a little longer before many freshmen during their critical transition period from high school will be able to interact with professors. Therefore, it is the immediate duty of all instructors and tutors to unite in efforts to give freshmen (as well as other fellow students who need assistance) the crucial attention and communication they require. Talking to them now will prepare them for interaction with professors later. Humor helps, but listening is paramount. Let us continue the above story with this in mind.

"I would like to begin by asking a quick question, if I may. Raise your hand if you consider yourself a perfect writer." Here I pause and wait to see what type of response I receive. I have asked this question before, and usually no one raises a hand. People chuckle and look around the room, but no hands go up this time, so I continue, "As you notice, no one raised their hand, including your instructor." She just shakes her head in accord. "And that is because 'We are all apprentices in a craft where no one becomes a master' (Hemingway)." Now that I have everyone's attention, I proceed.

I point to a student in the front row and ask, "What type of concerns do you have when you are getting started with a paper?" Direct questions loosen students (and me) up a little, starting the flow of conversation. If the students relax slightly, some of their true concerns may surface. After a few of his classmates have spoken, a student sitting right next to his instructor raises his hand and bravely asserts: "I thought I had done a really good job with this paper, but I just got it back and she totally shredded it and says it is unacceptable." (The teacher only smiles self-consciously.) I tell him that the first thing he will want to do is talk to his teacher about it, to try to understand why the teacher "shredded" the paper and how he might be able to improve it. Next I let him know that this type of situation is exactly what we at the Writing Center are here for: to help students understand/interpret instructor's expectations. During the course of the discussion, I keep my language clear but colloquial, keeping my audience closely in mind. Students can smell condescension and pretense a mile away, so I do not try to talk down to them. Instead, I try to talk with them as much as possible, letting them know how important communication is in the writing process.

While visiting another class, this time for peer response groups, I quietly approach a group and begin by saying "I don't want to interrupt or intrude, but would it be all right if I sit in during your critique? Maybe I can offer something helpful." After listening to them finish off what they are saying, I start by talking of communication: "What is your instructor's name?" They look at each other, searchingly. Finally, after a five second pause, two of the students chime in together "Ms. —." I get the impression that this group does not use their teacher's name very often. "Are you allowed to call her by her first name?" I query. No one knows. I go on to explain how English instructors are famous for being on an approachable, first name basis and are generally interested in communicating with their students. I tell them they should approach their instructors with the intent of finding out what sort of teacher they are: what sort of expectations they have; how much freedom of expression the teacher will allow them in their writing; can they use "I," can they use narrative, and of course how the teacher wishes to be addressed —communicate, communicate. Then we get down to the basics: theses, topic sentences, introductions (you know the list). Again, I am speaking with them, trying to get them to loosen up as much as possible, while still maintaining an air of credibility. I ask questions, then listen carefully to what they

have to say; they end up saying a lot and having good, specific questions. Finally, I try to leave each group with the memory of a Writing Center they can come to for assistance in coordinating information one-on-one, the same type of coordinating they should endeavor to establish with their instructors—speaking as well as listening.

After the peer review session is finished, and the students have left the classroom, I speak with the instructor briefly about how the session went and about her class in general. She voices her concern that most of the kids in the class simply are not trying to communicate with her: not visiting during office hours, not speaking to her after class. "I think that they were just showing off for you, trying to put their best foot forward," she says. This may be true, but the more we try to get students to put their best foot forward the better. The more we, as peer tutors, visit classrooms the better. Visits bring fresh faces and new perspectives into the classroom, for students and for instructors. These visits may provide just the right amount of material we need to build bridges to closer communication.

Steven J. Corbett
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Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

October 5, 2002: Michigan Writing Centers Association, in East Lansing, MI
Contact: Janet Swenson, jswenson@pilot.msu.edu. Conference Web site: http://writing.msu.edu/mwca

October 25-27, 2002: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Lawrence, KS
Contact: Michele Eodice (michele@ku.edu) or Cinda Coggins (CCoggins66@aol.com). Conference Web site: < http://www.writing.ku.edu/ncptw-mwca>.

February 13-15, 2003: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Charlotte, SC
Contact: Deanna Rogers, Writing Resources Center, 220 Fretwell, 9201 University City Blvd., UNC Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001. Phone: (704) 687-4226; fax: (704) 687 6988; e-mail: drrogers@email.uncc.edu. Conference Web site: <www.uncc.edu/writing/wrcindex.html>.

March 27-29, 2003: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Marietta, OH
Contact: Tim Catalano (catalant@marietta.edu) Director of the Campus Writing Center, 215 Fifth Street, Marietta College, Marietta, OH 45750 <Catalant@marietta.edu>. Conference Web site: <http://www.marietta.edu/~mcwrite/eastcentral.html>.

October 23-25, 2003: International Writing Centers Conference and National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, in Hershey, PA
Contact: Ben Rafoth, brafoth@iup.edu. Conference Web site: <www.wc.iup.edu/2003conference>.

Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference

Call for Proposals
April 11-12, 2003
Ogden, UT

Proposals are welcome on any subject pertaining to writing center theory and practice. For information, please contact Sylvia Newman, snewman@weber.edu or (801)626-6463.

Michigan Writing Centers Association

October 5, 2002
East Lansing, Michigan
"State of the Art"

For additional information about the Michigan Writing Centers Association annual conference on October 5, 2002 at Michigan State University: <http://writing.msu.edu/mwca>.

Writing center hours of operation: What influences them?

Like the local diner that stays open to serve customers, writing centers are open, too, to serve students. And just as the neon "Open" sign that hangs in the diner's window is unplugged at the end of the closing shift, so are the overhead lights switched off in writing centers. But how is the time between that first neon glow and the final switch of darkness accounted for in terms of days, evenings, and weekends? Let's find out.

Based on responses from writing centers, representing two-year and four-year colleges across the country*, here are some interesting weekly stats regarding hours of operation.

Total Writing Centers=	74
Total Weekly Hours =	3,651
Total Weekly Average =	50

	Daytime Hours	Evening Hours	Weekend Hours	Total Hours
Subtotal Hours	2,802	657	192	= 3,651
Percentage of Hours	77%	18%	5%	= 100%
Average Hours	38	9	3	= 50

Key: Daytime = 8 a.m. to 5:59 p.m.
Evening = 6 p.m. to midnight
Weekend = Saturday and Sunday

From the above data, it's obvious that the majority of writing centers operate during the day. So, what are some of the influences on writing center hours of operation?

From the online discussion, it appears that budget and security are two primary influences, particularly on evening hours. For example, many center directors say they don't have the budget to hire evening staff, plus they insist on at least two tutors on duty at the same time for their safety.

Also, some directors report that evening hours were eliminated because the number of users didn't justify the expense. Such low usage might be a result of a third influence on evening hours: the type of service that the center offers. For example, some centers only offer tutoring services whereas other centers also function as open computer labs.

A major influence on weekend hours seems to be the type of institution or, more importantly, the type of student. For example, writing centers at larger institutions with more traditional resident students report low usage on weekends, beginning with a Friday afternoon drop off, whereas smaller institutions with nontraditional commuter students report higher usage during weekends and evenings. Another influence on weekend hours seems to be the availability of OWLs (online writing labs). Those centers that offer an OWL seem to feel that it takes care of students' weekend needs.

The query did yield some surprising results. There are a number of centers that are open on Sundays, which are said to be the most popular and busiest, and there are quite a few centers that stay open until 10 p.m., 11 p.m., and even midnight. The same reason is given: that's when students write.

If the above is true, e.g., that students typically write late at night and on weekends, should writing centers make an effort to stay open during those times? While the ideal answer is "yes," it is tempered by the very real influences of staffing, budget, and usage.

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* Responses posted primarily on WCenter Listserv; some off list.

Learning Disabilities Association of America

For resources anda listing of conferences, both national and state conferences, see the following Web site: <www.LDAamerica.org>.

Viewing writing centers through Brian Cambourne's model of learning

Little has been written on the connection between writing centers and whole language theory. This is a curious fact, as the two have so much in common. In *Reading Process and Practice*, Constance Weaver dispels some of the misconceptions surrounding whole language. In misconception number five, she discusses why whole language should not be confined to the elementary classroom: "whole language is fundamentally a set of principles about learning and teaching. These principles are based on a constructivist, transactional model of learning that is relevant to teaching at all levels" (349). I was surprised as well when I looked into Brian Cambourne's ideas on whole language that a model designed for young children could be so useful for students of all ages, and especially in our work in writing centers.

The beginnings of the approach to teaching composition associated with writing centers date back to the early 1900's with the laboratory method (Carino 105). Some scholars feel the short-lived and controversial Dalton Plan of the 1920's, a model of individual instruction in composition, to be a forerunner of writing center practice (Pemberton, Holt). While these approaches involved individual instruction and peer-group work, the forebearers of today's writing centers got their own space in the 1930's when the University of Minnesota and the State University of Iowa set up writing laboratories that were separate from classrooms, with a focus on individual work (Carino 106). The writing center model is now entrenched and generally accepted as a crucial part of any composition program: "writing instruction without a writing center is only a partial program, lacking essential activities students need in order to grow and mature as writers" (Harris 42).

The whole language approach has always been implicitly involved in writing center pedagogy, although I could find only one essay that explicitly dealt with the connection. Sallyanne Fitzgerald, in her essay "Collaborative Learning and Whole Language Theory" in *Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center,* explained that although many writing centers have decided to follow a collaborative model, "The reason for using collaboration . . . lies in a broader theoretical base than simply group work or conferences: the whole language theory underpins the collaborative learning framework" (12). Fitzgerald goes on to say that by its very nature, writing center work involves whole language. For instance, in the writing conference itself, all four skills are used simultaneously: reading, writing, listening, and speaking: "In the writing center, using whole language means combining all the language arts while working on a written product" (13). Also, Fitzgerald states that reading aloud in the conference is more effective than reading silently, as more skills are involved: Reading, listening, and speaking. When we add writing, the students are, according to Fitzgerald, simultaneously assimilating and creating meaning: "Processing language using all the language arts is more likely to benefit students in using one of them" (14). And, a collaborative approach to tutoring is more likely to involve all the language arts. A directive, or tutor-centered conference may only involve passive listening. To illustrate this fact, she mentions a research study in which those students who engaged in collaborative conferences showed improvement, while those subjected to directive conferences did not (17).

The directive or teacher-centered conference seems to be the technique used in what is sometimes called the writing lab, as opposed to the writing center. The lab resembles the phonics or basal classroom in that bits of knowledge are fragmented and taught as isolated skills rather than a cohesive whole (Wallace 83-84). As Brian Cambourne and others have stated, the acts of reading and writing are so intertwined and interdependent that it is not too far afield to compare the models of their pedagogies.

Writing center people have been influenced by theories of social construction of knowledge. Ken Bruffee writes that "learning is a social process, not an individual one" (Bruffee 11). We believe that texts are written to be read, and that the writer needs to talk to someone at different points in the composing process (Harris). This is one way Cambourne's learning model ties in with writing center processes and practices. Brian Cambourne's model of whole language education as discussed in *The Whole Story* provides an interesting lens through which to examine our writing center practice.

The first and most important parallel between Cambourne's model and the writing center model is that reading, writing, listening, and speaking are engaged in as real attempts to communicate. Language is authentic and used in an authentic way. As mentioned above, language isn't fragmented or fractured into its component parts for study. Language is used as a whole, and as a tool for communication.

I would like to compare what we do in the writing center to Brian Cambourne's model of learning as described in *The Whole Story* (Cambourne) and *Reading Process and Practice* (Weaver). Cambourne's first step is **immersion**: "Learners need to

be immersed in text of all kinds" (33). In the writing center at the University of Texas Brownsville/Texas Southmost College Learning Assistance Center, we immerse readers in text—their own texts—by making these texts the focus of our tutorials. We don't engage in isolated skills drill. We display informative and entertaining quotes and posters on the walls, and maintain an adequate library consisting of novels, poetry, and drama, as well as criticism, class texts, reference works, and books on writing, teaching, and tutoring.

Cambourne's second step is **demonstration**: "Learners need to receive many demonstrations of how texts are constructed and used" (Cambourne 33). We call these demonstrations modeling. For instance, a student may need to brainstorm but not know how. We demonstrate the use of different strategies such as mapping, clustering, listing, or creating a matrix; however, we as tutors are careful not to force our favorite prewriting process on others. Another demonstration we could perhaps engage in is revising for mechanics or style. If the writer has made an error, rather than correct it for the student, we can compose a similar sentence and show how we would correct it, preferably giving multiple options for correction. An example of this would be showing the writer how to correct a comma splice by using either a semicolon, a period, or a conjunction.

Cambourne's third item is **expectation**. "Expectations of those to whom we are bonded are powerful coercers of behavior" (33). Bonding is an interesting concept. We can easily think of the motherly elementary teacher nurturing and bonding with her students. This bonding is a little bit more difficult to imagine between the studious professor and the carefree freshman. In fact, many students are intimidated or afraid to visit their professor's office for a chat about their writing (Harris 35-36). This is why the bonding that Cambourne mentions may take place in the writing center.

The peer tutor is in a position to be able to form such a relationship with the student. This is a unique situation where the writer looks on the tutor as a peer, and therefore regards her as non-threatening; but there is also a manner of respect, as the tutor's behavior as a good student has enabled her to achieve this position. Therefore, the tutor is in the ideal situation to have expectations of the writers she works with. We as tutors sometimes see the same student semester after semester. These relationships develop over time, and the tutor begins to understand the writer's capabilities (Healy 1-2). Nothing but the best effort will do. Of course we hold different expectations for different writers, as we see everyone from beginning ESL learners to graduate students. The peer tutor/writer relationship holds wonderful opportunities for this type of bonding and expectations.

The next item in Cambourne's model is **responsibility**: "Learners need to make their own decisions about when, how and what 'bits' to learn in any learning task. Learners who lose the ability to make decisions are 'depowered'" (33). The writing center is the ideal place for this kind of decision-making to happen. Most students who come to us do so voluntarily. We have a very small number of students—seven to be exact—who are required to attend tutorials because they haven't passed the written section of a standardized test required of all entering freshmen. Otherwise, all writers are voluntary attendants. This is wonderful, because any time someone comes in to work on a paper, they've done it of their own volition. That's the first step in taking responsibility for learning.

The second step is the negotiation of the task. Some writing centers are so student-centered that they work on whatever the student asks to do with no negotiation. While this would be feasible and positive in a place where writers had language to talk about their writing, if we conducted such a practice most of our tutorials would involve "checking for grammar." As Muriel Harris notes, "[the students] normally do not have the metaknowledge or the necessary metalanguage to ask the tutor" (36). So instead, we negotiate with the student. Our first priority is to check to see that the paper meets the assignment. The negotiation process sometimes involves the tutor asking to see the assignment sheet, while the tutee asks her to "check for grammar." I had a student the other day who insisted I check his paper for grammar while I insisted we look at the assignment. While I see the **responsibility** that this type of negotiation takes away from the student, I know most of them do not have concepts of focus, development, and coherence. Part of the tutor's job, and this goes back to the **demonstration**, is to teach the writer something about the words we use when we talk about our writing, and how we go through the process. Many of our writers' processes seem to be write one draft, check for grammar. With the **responsibility** needs to come awareness of what the choices are and their meanings. If we are not careful in this negotiation, we may fall into a pattern that Paulo Friere warns us about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> [Professionals] are almost unshakably convinced that it is their mission to 'give' the [people] their knowledge and techniques. . . . Their programs of action. . . include their own objectives, their own convictions, and their own preoccupations. . . . To these professionals it seems absurd to consider the necessity of respecting the 'view of the world' held by the people. . . . They regard as equally absurd the affirmation that one must necessarily consult the people when organizing the program content of educational action. (153-154)

In our position as tutors we must not disregard the wants of the student by assuming that we "know better" because of our position. Ultimately, the

one who knows what's best for the student is the student.

Once writers have taken responsibility for their learning and have made good choices, Cambourne's next step is **use**: "Learners need time and opportunity to use, employ, and practice their developing control in functional, realistic, non-artificial ways" (33). While much of this will depend on the teacher, in the writing center we give ample space and time for writers to practice their art on their own, and in their own time. We also help writers engage in real writing for real communication, such as scholarship application letters, letters to a child's principal, and business letters. But the practice of writing depends on the individual. The student must take the time. And, we have no control over the class assignments. Sometimes these are not realistic or functional. In that case we need to do our best to show students that sometimes in the real world we need to write because we are told to by a figure of authority, and rewards and consequences will come of it. Ken Bruffee mentions just such a situation in his essay "Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind":

> Certainly some writing in everyday working life is done purely as performance, for instance, to please superiors in the corporate hierarchy. So it may be that learning to write to someone who is not a member of one's own status and knowledge community, that is, to a teacher, has some practical everyday value; but the value of writing of this type is hardly proportionate to the amount of time students usually spend on it. Ultimately the choice rests in the writer: how will he or she choose to handle the situation? (15)

The next item in Cambourne's model is **approximation**: "Learners must be free to approximate the desired model—'mistakes' are essential for learning to occur" (33). One of the hardest things about being a tutor is learning to ignore errors as one reads a paper. Although the teachers may not be amenable to approximations, we attempt to meet writers where they are, rather than where we think they ought to be. As mentioned before, we try to work with writers using a hierarchy of concerns, the first of which is appropriateness to the assignment. The other concerns, in order of descending priority, are: organization, focus, development, mechanics, and style (Capossela 12). Therefore we must overlook approximations in spelling, grammar, and style when we are working with a writer on the overall organization of a paper. Also, we realize that the paper is not ours, it's the writer's; so if a paper is not perfect, that's OK; it's not our fault. This realization goes a long way for us, but not for all the professors.

The last and most important item on Cambourne's list is **response**: "Learners must receive 'feedback' from exchanges with more knowledgeable 'others.' **Response** must be relevant, appropriate, timely, readily available, non-threatening, with no strings attached" (33). Of all the items in Cambourne's agenda, this last one is most germane to our writing center work. The first six steps could all take place in the classroom, reserving this last step for the writing center. Writing centers exist now from the elementary through the college level, so this could be a real option for all educators.

When it comes to the various types of feedback Cambourne advises, the writing center can do them all. Response that is *relevant* addresses the writer's immediate needs and concerns. As I mentioned above, we are struggling to make our responses even more *relevant* by adhering to the writer's wishes in guiding the direction the conference will take.

Knowing what the *appropriate* response might be involves getting to know the writer as a person. When we work one-to-one with a writer, we get to know his needs and talents. What might be good work for one student might be poor work for another. Often the *appropriate* response for writers means being there to encourage them and to cheer them on (Harris 34-36).

Timely response is another area for which the writing center can provide. Working on a drop-in basis, we are there any time a writer is ready for feedback. The only time we are not available is weekends. This is an area that needs to be improved upon. Many writing centers conduct tutorials on Sunday evening, and these are very popular and well attended.

Being *readily available* relates directly to being *timely*. Our Writing Center is located in the Learning Assistance Center in a building where students have many of their classes. We are there should they choose to come down. We also have tutoring available by email, making it *readily available*, even off-campus. While not an official function of the writing center, I have also been known to answer the telephone queries that come in from time to time.

The peer-tutoring model by its very nature is *non-threatening*. We don't give grades or evaluate papers. We try to behave in ways that are non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian, and non-directive. The models of tutoring we follow are student-centered or collaborative, depending on the writer and the situation. The tutor is not in a position of power or superiority. The tutoring session is held between equals, with the common goal of talking about the writer's process. There is no pressure.

It's important to Cambourne that the feedback have *no strings attached*. In the writing center we do have students sign in, but that is the only "string." The students all pay a student activities fee that supports the Learning Assistance Center. Therefore, if any one student does not use the service, he may be missing out. The tutoring is free, and the tutors ask nothing in return. Some grateful tutees buy us lunch or bring us dessert, but this is a rarity. Most students come in, talk to a tutor and leave, with truly *no strings attached*.

Studying Cambourne's model and seeing how it relates to our writing center

practice has opened my eyes in many ways. The writing center cannot be everything to everybody. Some parts of the learning model are better conducted in the classroom. "We need several types of knowledge, some more easily gained in the classroom and others more appropriately acquired in the one-to-one setting of the tutorial" (Harris 40). And, we're not perfect. We need to work on the way we give writers **responsibility**. We may only be paying lip service to student ownership of texts if we impose our priorities and notions of hierarchy of error. It's a paradox that the writing center can see itself as non-hierarchical, yet subscribe to a hierarchy of error. Examining the writing center from the perspective of Cambourne's model of learning is a valuable and productive undertaking.

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THE WRITING LAB
NEWSLETTER

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