THE WRITING LAB

...FROM THE EDITOR...

With this issue we begin Volume 29 of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, and while we continue to welcome new readers joining the group, many of us can remember when *WLN* began 29 years ago as a few typewritten pages. Appropriately, this issue begins with Neal Lerner's study of where our field was fifty years ago and where we are now. And as he reminds us, it is important to contribute to the Writing Centers Research Project's work in gathering information about our field. (See p. 8 for WCRP's call for participation in their most recent survey.)

Haeli Colina offers an account of a tutor stepping out of the comfort zone of a native speaker to gain a fresh perspective on why we should seek out ESL students' intentions. Rhiannon Kiesel explores ways to deal with students writing about inappropriate topics, Melissa Nicolas researches the academic progress of women in writing centers, and Bonnie Devet offers another way to train new tutors.

Finally, you'll note on page 2 that Mitch Simpson is no longer the Managing Editor of *WLN* as he moves on to teach full-time. Shawna Burton will attempt to take on the *WLN* work that Mitch performed so well.

• Muriel Harris, editor

...INSIDE...

Writing centers fifty years later

The state of the writing center profession feels pretty positive these days. With an international organized network of writing centers, thriving regional organizations, two journals devoted to publishing writing center work, and an academic press, our field seems established, relatively stable, accepted. Yet fifty years ago, writing center directors likely felt similarly about their status and their prospects. Based on his 1953 survey of 60 writing laboratories nationwide, Claude Shouse concluded that "the writing laboratory is needed and desirable in colleges and universities of any type or size" (271). During this relative heyday for writing centers in the early 1950s, six of the first seven meetings of the Conference on College Composition and Communication featured workshops on writing centers (see Appendix A). This promise and activity gave Claude Shouse some significant material for his dissertation. Yet within ten years after Shouse's work, writing centers seemed to have slipped off of the professional map. As Albert Kitzhaber noted in a 1962 *College English* article, "the writing clinics and laboratories are being abandoned since students are seldom so poorly prepared as to require special remedial services

of this sort" (477). And it wouldn't be until the late 1970s and early 1980s that writing centers would regain the footing they seemed poised to achieve back in the early 1950s. So what happened in those intervening years? And could a similar rubbing out occur

again, despite the gains our field has made? How illusory is our professional status and what is it based on?

An answer to these questions can be found by comparing Shouse's findings with a contemporary survey of writing center life, the one conducted for the 2000/2001 academic year by the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) at the University of Louisville (Ervin, "The Writing Centers Research Project."). In both the Shouse and the WCRP survey, writing center directors were asked about institutional demographics, staffing, and administration, among other topics. The results of these two surveys, taken roughly fifty years apart, offer striking similarities about the status of writing center directors, the reliance on contingent staffing, and the never-ending search for additional resources and institutional definition. Shouse's view of writing laboratory life circa 1953, then, acts as a daguerreotype of a previous era, but also as a snapshot of our contemporary lives, one that holds meaning for our future direction.

Prevalence and persistence of writing Centers

In 1953, Claude F. Shouse was the writing laboratory director at San Diego State College (now University) and a graduate student at the University of Southern California. I first stumbled upon his dissertation while poking around on Dissertation Abstracts International and then, after fortuitous email contact, generously received a copy from Shouse's daughter, Mary (Shouse) Benson. The obscurity of Shouse's research is particularly telling for me in terms of our field's relative youth as an academic discipline and lack of knowledge of its history. On one level Shouse was simply far ahead of his time. It wouldn't be until 1975 that another dissertation would focus on writing centers (Carol Laque and Phyllis Sherwood's co-authored research), but by no means should Shouse's obscurity be equated with a lack of intellectual rigor. Shouse

described in detail 60 writing laboratories nationwide, ones that had responded to his 19-page survey or ones that he had personally visited (for a list of the institutions surveyed, see Lerner). His 350-page account contradicts the persistent belief that writing centers are a relatively new phenomenon, part and parcel of the writing process movement and Open Admissions influx of under-prepared student writers onto our campuses. Instead, from Shouse we now know that writing centers have long been the answer to the question of how best to teach writing, even if that question has seemed rhetorical at times.

Comparing Shouse's survey and the data collected by the WCRP reveals the remarkable similarities of writing centers at these two points in history. Of Shouse's writing laboratories, 57% were in public settings, and 43% were in private colleges or universities. Fifty years later, 68% of the institutions responding to the WCRP survey were public, and 32% were private, a relatively similar distribution and evidence that writing centers have long been a solution for any type of institution, just as Shouse described.

Also countering a long-standing myth is Shouse's finding that 76% of the labs he surveyed described themselves as "writing laboratory available, for the most part, to all students on a college-wide basis" (71). Fewer than 7% of the labs Shouse surveyed described themselves as a remedial laboratory open only for students on a "sub-freshman level" (71). While the WCRP did not ask respondents for similar descriptions in the 2000/01 survey, the question was asked in the following year's survey. Of the 125 writing center directors reporting, 117 or nearly 94% described themselves as "available for all students" (Ervin, Personal Communication). Thus, from the point of view of writing center directors fifty years apart, the center's remedial image is a representation consistently rejected, and perhaps the

characterization of early writing centers as little more than houses of detention can finally be discarded as well.

One other mark of the prevalence of writing centers fifty years ago comes out of Shouse's research methodology. Shouse sent his survey data to an "evaluation jury" of 17 composition professionals in order for them to offer opinion on the writing laboratory operations he had described. Those 17 read like a "Who's Who" of composition leaders of that era, including Glenn Leggett of the University of Washington, Barriss Mills of Purdue, Porter Perrin of the University of Washington, and Charles Roberts of the University of Illinois. Thus, many of the leading figures in the field of composition responded to Shouse's inquiry, and, as a result, they were offered a comprehensive view of the writing laboratory scene in the early 1950s. It is much later, then, that writing centers would become "Our Little Secret" (Boquet). In Shouse's time they were a known and relatively commonplace entity.

Signs of trouble—Staffing and administration

Given the relative prevalence and acceptance of writing centers back in the early 1950s, why did they slip off of the map by the early 1960s? One important clue comes from the staffing and administration patterns described by Shouse, patterns still true and even more troubling today. For example, Ervin reports that 42% of the writing center directors in the WCRP survey held positions as tenured or tenure track faculty, followed by non-faculty or professional staff (32.64%). Still the majority of those reporting (58%) were non-tenurable faculty or staff. Back in Shouse's day, of the 100 faculty writing lab staff members, 43% held the rank of assistant, associate or full professor and 48% designated themselves as "instructor." Based on this evidence, our field has made little to no progress (or even regressed) in terms of ensuring our writing centers are run by di-

rectors who will have the protection of a tenure system during the next round of budget cuts or who actually get to vote at faculty meetings and serve on curriculum committees, rather than be invited as the occasional guest. In this measure of permanence and stability, we still have much work to do.

Writing center staffing patterns offer additional clues, given Shouse's description:

> Teachers in general and English teachers in particular spend much time on their own in helping individual students, but a formal laboratory setup may fail if not given released time and space. One director writes that the whole idea is being abandoned in her school because teachers are reluctant to refer students to a laboratory director already overworked, even though that director may be quite willing to spend extra hours, without compensation, to maintain the laboratory. (118)

This paucity of resources seemed particularly acute back then; in fact, over a third of the 60 laboratories that Shouse described were staffed by "only one faculty member." While a few of these 20 or so laboratories had student or staff assistants, the common model is a writing center of one overworked lab director as Shouse describes in the previous quote. Such a situation made it easy to relieve those directors of their writing center duties once writing centers were cast off in the early 1960s. Faculty could be reassigned to classroom teaching, and non-faculty staff could be let go to pursue non-academic options.

Contrast this situation with the findings of the WCRP. From Ervin's report, we learn that the average number of consultants per writing center is 16, with a high of 100 and a low of 1. Also, undergraduate writing consultants make up the majority of staffs now, with 79% of those surveyed by the WCRP reporting such staffing (3).

In contrast, in 1953 only one of 60 institutions described anything similar: San Francisco State College (now University) employed 13 "student assistants" along with five faculty members, each of whom had 20 percent of his or her time dedicated to tutoring in the laboratory. Certainly the dynamics of our centers have changed dramatically with the introduction of undergraduate peer tutors. As Ken Bruffee writes, "peer tutoring is the systematic application of collaborative principles to that last bastion of hierarchy and individualism, institutionalized education" (14). The prevalence of peer tutors in our centers ensures strong possibilities for the agenda of de-institutionalization. However, that same presence offers a low-cost alternative to a writing center staffed by faculty or professionals and is an entity much more vulnerable to budget cuts and staff turnover.

These differences in staff size and composition also lead to other potential vulnerabilities for the contemporary writing center. Back in 1953, Shouse's respondents reported that their labs were open anywhere from 1 to 50 hours per week with an average of about 13 hours. In the 2000/01 academic year, writing centers responding to the WCRP survey reported that they were open an average of 46.5 hours per week with a range of 8 to 210 hours ("Writing Centers Research Project"). An interesting spin on these numbers is to look at how many hours per week each staff member was providing. In 1953 it was 3.7 hours per staff member per week, and fifty years later it was 2.9 hours per staff member per week. This drop is once again attributable to the composition of the staff itself—faculty tutors were likely able to commit more of their time to staffing the writing center than peer tutors with full-time class schedules and outside-of-class commitments. Once again a reliance on undergraduate student labor might result in more tutoring hours available, but the costs include frequent staff turnover or tutors that do

not work enough hours to put into practice the ideas that educational sessions or tutor training might offer.

These labor conditions speak to a major economic shift in writing centers over the last fifty years (Ervin, Personal Communication). It's to no one's surprise that a staff of peer tutors costs relatively less than a staff of graduate students, professionals, or faculty. Writing center directors responding to the 2000/01 WCRP survey reported an average undergraduate pay rate of $6.40 per hour, about half of the average graduate student rate ("Writing Centers Research Project"). Inexpensive student labor has fueled the explosive growth of writing centers in the last fifty years. Perhaps, though, labor exploitation is nothing new in our work: The vast majority of the "regular faculty" who staffed writing laboratories in Shouse's time performed that duty as part of their "regular salary," while twelve faculty reported receiving "no financial compensation" (125). These economic realities act as an undercurrent of our work, reminding us of how complicit we are in the labor exploitation that has been essential to the enterprise of higher education. And they also offer a grim reminder that our stability is built on an extraordinarily fragile foundation.

Back to the future

So how secure are we fifty years after Shouse's survey? One disturbing finding comes from the response rate to the WCRP survey. The WCRP directory lists 935 writing centers in institutions of higher education (Ervin, Personal Communication); however, only 188 colleges and universities responded to the survey despite extensive efforts to make on-line and mail contact. What does that say about the nearly 750 writing centers who didn't fill out the WCRP survey? Did the overworked directors not have the time? Did they feel that their descriptions wouldn't make much of a contribution? How much professional status

has our field acquired given the relative isolation of so many of our centers?

Equally disturbing is the familiarity of the 38 responses Shouse received when asking his survey respondents to assemble a wish-list of sorts:

> About one-fourth of these respondents would like more teacher-time, some wishing for better-trained staffs. In varying numbers others felt a need for better laboratory quarters and equipment; better coordination with the school as a whole, with special emphasis on the need of serving the student body in greater numbers; better-defined criteria for evaluating writing and writing instruction; and better attitude on the part of administration and student body toward the work (207-208).

The areas in need of improvement back in 1953 would likely be on any writing center director's list in 2003. We have certainly come a very long way in the last 50 years, but we still have much work to do to ensure that this same list doesn't appear on the year 2053 WCRP survey results.

But just what is it that we can do? I see at least three vital moves:

> 1. *Research our writing centers' and our field's history*: Historical legacy is a powerful argument in higher education where preserving the status quo is often a powerful force. As Shouse demonstrated, many of our writing centers have been around in one form or another for a very long time.

> 2. *Make some hard choices about our labor practices*: I am not calling for the jettisoning of peer tutors. Far from it; instead, I believe we should compensate peer tutors at levels that are fair, competitive, and attractive. Perhaps that might mean

operating for fewer hours per week, but one can make a powerful argument for more resources when services are maxed out and in high demand.

> 3. *Support the Writing Centers Research Project as a key research site/think tank*: Established in 2001, the WCRP, according to its mission, "conducts and supports research on writing center theory and practice and maintains a research repository of historical, empirical, and scholarly materials related to Writing Center Studies" (WCRP Mission). Unlike Shouse's era, we now have a central place and source of energy for our work. Completing WCRP surveys and otherwise contributing to its mission benefits our entire field.

The descriptions of writing center life provided by Claude Shouse and the WCRP offer us all benchmarks against which we can judge our own centers, both historically and currently, and plan for our futures. My hope, of course, is that our contemporary history isn't as lost as was Claude Shouse's research. Instead, my idea is that the continuity and persistence writing centers have shown over the last fifty years will be reflected in a new era marked by true professional status and the stability that comes with it.

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Appendix A—Writing Center Workshop Accounts from early Conferences on College Composition and Communication

"The Organization and Use of the Writing Laboratory: The Report of Workshop No. 9A." *College Composition and Communication* 1.2 (May 1950): 31-32.

"Organization and Use of a Writing Laboratory: Report of Workshop No. 9." *College Composition and Communication* 2 (1951): 17-18.

"The Writing Laboratory: The Report of Workshop No. 9." *College Composition and Communication* 3.4 (Dec. 1952): 23-25.

"Clinical Aids to Freshman English: Report of Workshop No. 14." *College Composition and Communication* 4.3 (Oct. 1953): 102-3.

"Writing Clinics: The Report of Workshop No. 2." *College Composition and Communication* 6.3 (Oct. 1955): 125-126.

"Skills Laboratories for Any Student." *College Composition and Communication* 7.3 (Oct. 1956): 143-44.

Call for submissions for undergraduate writing

Call for Submissions: *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* seeks theory-driven and/or research-based submissions from undergraduates on the following topics: writing, rhetoric, composition, professional writing, technical writing, business writing, discourse analysis, writing technologies, peer tutoring in writing, writing process, writing in the disciplines, and related topics.

Submissions should make an intellectual contribution to their respective fields. Submissions should be 10-20 pages, in MLA format, and should be accompanied by a professor's note that the essay was written by the student. Please send three copies of manuscript without author's name on manuscript. Please include author's name, address, affiliation, e-mail address, and phone number on *separate* title page.

Send inquiries and submissions to Candace Spigelman and Laurie Grobman, Penn State University, Berks-Lehigh Valley College, P.O. Box 7009, Tulpehocken Road, Reading, PA 19610-6009. E-mail inquiries to cxs11@psu.edu or leg8@psu.edu. To be considered for Volume 3, please submit manuscript by January 31, 2005.

Trading spaces: Looking out and looking in on the challenges of the writing process

Maricruz leaned in, her eyes glistening, and the words I had dreaded over the otherwise uneventful practice session finally surfaced: "Did you think about what we said last time?"

For the better part of a semester, we had been meeting every week to improve her conversational and written English. We had read books, filled out doctors' forms, practiced professional correspondence, and laughed about the sometimes-surprising challenges of working between languages, all as part of a pilot program at Southwestern University, an effort meant to build community ties between students and staff. We had, in fact, bonded over these few months—gone from cordial and restrained to chatty and giggling, and had still managed to get some work done, but two weeks before this moment, Maricruz had found out that I was not a Christian, and since that time, she had consistently encouraged me to seek out my faith. I could have put a stop to it earlier. I should have, but the day she found out was the first day I really saw her struggle—I watched her push past the missing vocabulary and the shaky conjugations and the constant anxiety to tell me about something she felt so deeply that her voice cracked as she spoke quietly—and in beautiful English. I had not responded to her except to compliment how well she expressed herself, and thereafter, at the end of each session, she would inquire about my "progress." I was caught in a very uncomfortable position as her volunteer ESL coach and her friend.

Hanging in the balance of this sensitive issue was the working environ-ment I had been extremely careful to maintain. When we first started practicing, each word out of her mouth had to be coaxed with gentle persistence—she was extremely shy and spent the majority of each hour in a deep crimson blush. She had expected fill-in-the-blanks exercises and absolutist lectures on grammatical form, and I was asking her to tell me about her favorite movies and what she did over Thanksgiving break—we spent every other week's session without pulling out a pen or a single piece of paper.

It's all very hard work. It's frustrating, embarrassing, and irreplaceable as a learning method. Gradually, the particular challenges of working with a non-native speaker of English became apparent. When a native English speaker comes to our writing center for a consultation, the given object of attention is the written assignment (although we always stress the importance of turning out better writers over better writing). However, when the goal is either to teach English or to workshop writing produced by an ESL student, the attention is necessarily more personal and far reaching. The distance between the writer's intention and the product's expression has traveled through an added stage of translation, and the emotional stakes are much higher. A native speaker can rest cozily in the notion that it's not their grasp of the materials or their writing skills in question, but just this one paper that needs revision, while the non-native speaker has often already learned to accept that every stage of his or her learning, incorporation, and writing ability is fair game for workshopping. Therefore, we can say

that, while there has been some disagreement over whether or not ESL students require more directive assistance in revising their work, it is doubtless that they often require more sensitivity and perceptiveness from the consultant. The vulnerability we all feel when sharing our writing increases exponentially when that writing has been painstakingly filtered through somewhat worrisome linguistic approximations. The need to reach out for support in what can be an extremely daunting task is often countered by the feelings of shame that can arise from admission of this need or a perceived lack of independence in the act.

Within this context, Maricruz's eagerness to help me find God could be interpreted not only as a spiritual priority but as a psychologically-desirable attempt to establish stronger reciprocity in and therefore "balance" our relationship. If I could volunteer my time to help her practice her English, she could devote hers to help guide me onto what she saw as the only true path. Unfortunately for my woefully unassertive self, it is the job of the consultant to culture a relationship with consultees that is welcoming enough to promote risk-taking and candor, nondirective enough to maintain the autonomy and responsibility of the writer, and professional enough to discourage unrelated personal entanglements like the one developed between Maricruz and me.

As I see it, the primary tool we must use in building this ideal relationship is honesty. Honesty will supply the sincere praise of written or oral work that

will help the writer through the more tedious or discouraging tasks at hand, and it will promote trust of the consultant and consultation as genuine and worthwhile. Honesty will also prevent this praise from crossing the line into 'cheerleading' as described by Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad (17), which, contrary to its purpose, can be infinitely discouraging because it is easily detected, severs the bond of trust, and generally patronizes the writer. Honesty will help us to delineate appropriate boundaries and speak up when those boundaries are crossed.

Although my situation with Maricruz was complicated by the fact that she was not an occasional visitor to the writing center but rather a much more intimate, long-term coaching partner and an older woman who had admitted to having some motherly instincts to protect and advise me, I should have been honest enough to voice both my discomfort with the situation and the fact that her aims were not appropriate to the circumstances.

* * * * * *

I was sitting in a computer lab in Montevideo, Uruguay, after nearly five months of wrestling with the Spanish language to produce anything from short personal narratives to historical research reports, and I had just received the best present I would have during my semester there. A small postscript included in an e-mail from one of my professors informed me that my term paper for his class, Anthropological Philosophy, was "really, but *really* good." This was particularly satisfying having come from the same professor who gave me the equivalent of a "C" on my first paper because it didn't have a cover. As crushing as that had been to a student whose neurotic obsession with grades was unrivaled, my first grade had made it very clear that I would not be coasting through his class on special treatment, and that any praise I might receive

would be hard won and deserved. It also showed me that whatever instincts I had as a writer would not be sufficient to help me predict or fulfill the technical expectations such as cover folders and single spacing and sectioned text with subtitles that were already so second nature to my Uruguayan classmates. Knowing full well that I would need someone else's explicit instruction to remedy the situation, I still sat and deliberated with the phone in my hands for a long time before I could bring myself to call and ask for this help. Even in that moment, I understood the irony of this dilemma, that a sometime writing consultant would be balking at the idea of requesting help, but part of my reluctance came from a troublesome tendency of many of my Uruguayan acquaintances who had been a little too helpful in other cases. It seemed that whenever I showed signs of having difficulties (whether or not these difficulties related to language), the people around me would begin to speak English. They did this with good intentions—a willingness to help or comfort me and perhaps enthusiasm for having an opportunity to practice their English with a native speaker. But I was always embarrassed and sometimes resentful of this inclination because it impeded my practice in Spanish (which was my reason for studying abroad) and implied that my communication skills in Spanish were inadequate for the occasion.

I understand that not all ESL students seeking consultations are exchange students like I was, but in a collegiate setting, there can be many, and out of these, most will be studying at least in part to learn to operate in English. This is why I feel that the growing number of scholarly articles that recommend that ESL students do more work in their native language are not adequately accounting for the student's overall goals. Yes, working in their native languages may improve the quality

of a particular writing consultation or limited exchange, but if the general goal is to participate in university life as an English speaker, encouraging them to go back to using their native language would be jarring at best and insulting at worst.

A separate and equally well-meaning habit of many people I met during my semester abroad was the tendency to "correct" my work for me in such a way that the complexities of the ideas or stylistic language were erased. Often the phrasing I used expressed precisely what I had intended, but the use of this sometimes figurative or abstract wording was immediately dismissed by my professors, who assumed I had meant something much more simple and straightforward without pausing to consider how it could work in the context. When I discussed these ideas with them, it often turned out that the language usage was effective for my purpose. Other times it may have been technically correct, but they would suggest idioms or different phrasing to express my idea. These misunderstandings were bound to happen, but what stuck with me was the concern that in many settings, including my own writing center back in the US, non-native speakers were sometimes accidentally denied the privilege of using artistic license. The underlying, often subconscious assumption is that these writers are incapable of higher-level or abstract thought and expression in a nonnative language—the "no, it must have been a side effect of translation" approach. The bad news is that this can be extremely harmful to the consultant-writer relationship. If a non-native speaker gets the sense that a consultant thinks he or she is not smart just because he or she is not a native speaker, the confidence lost between them will be difficult or impossible to rebuild. The good news is that this little pitfall can be easily avoided by sticking to what should already be one of our most basic tenets: Ask First. This means that

whether your consultees are native or non-native speakers of English, we hold off our assumptions of their intentions and ask them to explain for themselves what they were trying to accomplish in a certain passage or sentence. Sometimes it will simply be an issue of mistranslation, sometimes the language will be correct while the meaning is unclear—sometimes they will mean exactly what it says, and it's much safer and more responsible for us, as consultants, to give them the benefit of the doubt.

* * * * *

Now that I'm back in my comfort zone, surrounded by people I know and words I have been using for as long as I can remember, I once again have the luxury of loosening up and feeling confident in the communicative value of my writing. But for the very first time in my life, I actually understand this situation to be a luxury. I write without constant anxiety, talk without constant clarification, and feel that I truly belong in the community of people and words that surrounds me. I know now that this is something not everyone has the pleasure of taking for granted. I also know now that they should. And that they can, if we, as their consultants, strive to help them construct this comfort zone. What I have written about here has not included many concrete pieces of advice ("do this, don't do that")—there are enough manuals out there that do a better job than I could in that area. What I hope to have brought to the table is a first-hand sensibility about the particular emotional needs of non-native speakers with the understanding that we, as human beings, often have an in-nate and generally accurate sense of how to cater to those needs once we can recognize and name them. Each consultation and each consultee is different, but by continuing to explore the psychological needs and formal aspects of our work with them, we can develop the necessary awareness and resulting methodology that will allow us to offer more appropriate, more personalized, and more effective services. It may not bring us to God, but at least it will put us on the right path for our work with people like Maricruz.

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Writing Centers Research Project Survey

The Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) circulated its third biannual survey on writing centers in late August 2004. The WCRP survey establishes benchmark information for writing centers; accurate information about writing centers will depend on your generosity in providing information. Please watch for and complete this year's survey.

If you are a writing center director and did not received the survey by the end of August, please go to the WCRP web site http://www.louisville.edu/a-s/ writing center/wcenters/ to complete the survey. If you received the request and are no longer a writing center director, we ask that you forward the survey request to the appropriate person. Questions may be addressed to Carol Mattingly (502) 852-2204 or carol.mattingly@louisville.edu.

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Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

October 16, 2004: Michigan Writing Centers Association, in Lansing, MI
  Contact: Jill Pennington, e-mail: penninj@lcc.edu, phone: 517-483-1298. Conference Website: <miwritingcenters.org>.

November 4-6, 2004: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Cloud, MN
  Contact: Frankie Condon, Department of English, 720 Fourth Avenue South, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498. Web site: <http://www.ku.edu/~mwca/>.

February 10-12, 2005: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Charleston, SC
  Contact: Trixie Smith, Middle Tennessee State University, Department of English, P.O. Box 70, Murfreesboro, TN 37132. E-mail: tgsmith@mtsu.edu; Web site: <www.swca.us>.

October 19-23, 2005: International Writing Centers Association, in Minneapolis, MN

TUTORS' COLUMN

Tutoring inappropriate paper topics

As a writing tutor in the peer tutoring program at a community college, I have encountered a diverse group of students seeking writing help. International students, high school students earning college credits, and older students going back to school, all attend the college. When students have varying backgrounds and perspectives, they often have a wide array of ideas and opinions. This can lead to differences in what topics students find appropriate to write about.

Students I have worked with, especially in beginning-level courses, tend to feel most confident writing about their own experiences and subjects they have personal interest in. Teachers of these beginning levels give assignments such as "write an essay about a recent experience" or "write an essay about an instance in your childhood" because it can be easier for people who are just beginning to write academically to have a topic they are familiar with. It is an empowering experience to put one's thoughts into words, but it can cause trouble if the opinions of the student and the tutor differ in fundamental ways. For the tutor, it can be difficult to put time and effort into helping a student write about a topic that makes her/him feel offended, uncomfortable, nervous or disgusted. Some tutors may feel uncomfortable dealing with topics of:
- religion
- sexual orientation
- political opinions
- overly personal content such as
  - family problems
  - abusive situations
  - health problems
  - drug problems
  - criminal behavior or criminal history

There are two ways to deal with personally unsettling or inappropriate subject matter. First, if tutors do not feel they can comfortably deal with the situation, they could send the student to another tutor, or to a supervisor. In this case it is important to explain to the student that it is the subject matter that is causing the problem, so they do not feel personally rejected. If the student appears to be troubled, or emotionally disturbed, a tutor can suggest they see a counselor and then give them the contact information of a counselor at the school. The second thing tutors can do, if they feel that they can handle the situation themselves, is suggest that the subject seems offensive or inappropriate and that perhaps the instructor would feel the same way. The student might not realize the topic choice is not appropriate for an academic setting, especially if they are new to the college environment.

It is important to remember that feelings and tutoring abilities can remain separate. Tutors are not always familiar with the subjects of papers they help students organize. They may also be able to help with the mechanics of a paper even if they do not agree with what the student wants to focus on. Tutors can try to work with students to help them see that some topics can disturb or offend readers. The goal is to help students understand how to make a choice about the topic based on the audience that will be reading their work. Ultimately, the paper topic is the student's choice, but tutors can help students see that every writer must be conscious that certain topics may disturb or offend readers.

Not everyone agrees with or feels comfortable with the same topics, so it is important not to take the situations that arise in a tutoring session personally. Tutors should remember that they are tutoring by choice. As peer tutors, they have decided to help other students with their work, but they are not bound to do anything that makes them feel as though their values are being compromised. Background differences create variable perspectives, which can be valuable to both the student and the tutor. A potentially difficult tutoring session could turn into a learning experience for both the tutor and the student if they share opinions and open their minds to new ideas.

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Writing Program and Writing Center Director
Capella University
Minneapolis, MN

Capella's Writing Program (which houses two Writing Centers) seeks to fill the position of Writing Program Coordinator. The person who fills this position will be part of the Writing Program, but will have primary responsibilities within Capella's Writing Centers.

The Writing Program Coordinator is responsible for strategizing, planning, building, and maintaining Capella's Writing Centers: the Mobile Writing Center, which travels across the country several times a year to offer services to PhD learners; and the Online Writing Center, which offers online modules, handouts, and tutoring. The coordinator's activities may include, but are not limited to: coordinating the growth and implementation of the Online Writing Center and the Mobile Writing Center; conducting research related to the Writing Program and the Writing Centers; overseeing new content development for both Writing Centers; coordinating writing center consultant schedules, training, and professional development; participating actively in the university's WAC initiatives; and working on committees across the curriculum.

Responsibilities:
- Travel to residential colloquia at various locations throughout the United States to manage the Mobile Writing Center;
- Oversee the building, customization, and branding of Capella's Online Writing Center;
- Oversee the ongoing development and branding of Capella's Mobile Writing Center

- Develop a systematic, on-going needs assessment for both Writing Centers, and respond to those assessments by strengthening the Writing Centers' materials, teaching, and staff;
- Develop systems for researching, assessing, and evaluating the cross-curricular efficacy of both Writing Centers;
- Contribute to the on-going growth of the Writing Program and its relationship to the Writing Centers;
- Provide necessary support, as determined, to Writing Program faculty members and projects;
- Represent the Writing Program by participating on university-wide committees;
- Other duties as assigned.

PhD in Composition/Rhetoric or related field is preferred. ABDs are encouraged to apply, as are those with equivalent work experience. This is a 12-month, on-site position. (Capella University is located in Minneapolis, MN.) The salary range is $40-45,000. If you have questions about the job itself, you can contact me at carole.chabries@capella.edu. For the full job description, visit our website at www.capella.edu/careers.

Interested applicants should forward a cover letter and resume via e-mail to: brian.hughes@capella.edu, Capella Education Company, Human Resources, 222 South 9th Street, 20th Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55402-3389. Applications accepted until the position is filled.

Michigan Writing Centers Association

Ideas Exchange
October 16, 2004
Lansing Community College
"Ten Years in the Making"

Two sessions of six presentations each will be held in the morning. Each session will last sixty minutes. Proposals for presentations may be submitted by writing center administrators and tutors alike. Cross-institutional collaboration is encouraged. Two "tutor talk" sessions of four topics each will take place in the afternoon. Each session will last forty-five minutes. Information and the CFP can be found at <http://www.miwritingcenters.org>.

Where the women are: Writing centers and the academic hierarchy

Recently, I have been out on the job market, hoping to secure a tenure track position as an assistant professor and writing center director with adequate release time to run the writing center and conduct my research at an institution that will value my writing center work as an administrator and researcher as something more than a mere committee assignment. I know. I know. Many of you have fallen off your chairs laughing by now. Of course, I have not yet found such a position. But, through this process, I have experienced a moment of serendipity, albeit bittersweet, as my research interests and my job search mission have come together in interesting ways.

My current research agenda concerns the marginalization and feminization of writing centers, and, on my campus visits, I have been privy to the unofficial rhetoric surrounding many of these positions. Unfortunately, the news is not so good. For all the official interview talk about the value a particular school assigns to its writing center, I have not been able to shake the feeling that at least some members of the search committees are wary of my motives for wanting to be a writing center director. The unofficial message I have received (on the ride to the airport, at dinner, on a campus tour) is that while that institution would love to have me on staff, this or that particular faculty member cannot understand why someone with my "talent" and "credentials" (their words) would *want* the position. I specifically recall one campus visit where I had to convince the search committee that writing center work was my first choice and that I was not some literature scholar in disguise, taking a writing center job until something "better" came along. This visit ended with the department chair assur-

ing me that if I took the director position, I would not have to stay in the writing center permanently, that I could move out of the center and, I guess, up a rung or two on the ladder of institutional respect.

At first, I was surprised by these attitudes because I assumed that if a department were hiring a tenure track person to run the writing center, then at least that particular department regarded writing center work as important, serious, and "real." And, indeed, my assumptions were not completely unfounded as institutional rank is perhaps one of the most visible indicators of the value an institution places on the writing center. As Carol Haviland, Carmen Fye, and Richard Colby note when discussing the space (another visible sign of assigned value) writing centers occupy:

> Location is political because it is an organizational choice that creates visibility or invisibility, access to resources, and associations that define the meanings, uses, and users of designated spaces. . . . These locations . . . shape the roles others perceive writing, writers, and writing centers play as well as the images writers and writing centers have of themselves. (85-6)

Even though Haviland, Fye, and Colby focus on the physical location of writing centers, their point about visibility and invisibility, access to resources, and the shaping of perceptions of roles can also be applied to the situation of center directors. After all, academic rank, too, has "political edges that are costly if ignored" since there is a hierarchical structure in the academy that rewards people with power and respect based on their position.

In this ranking system, however, writing center directors, as a group, do not fare so well. Both data I collected and data collected by the Writing Center Research Project (WCRP) reveal that more than 50% of writing center directors are in non-tenure track positions. These findings, while disheartening, are probably not surprising, and, before my recent interview experiences, I would have naively suggested that the way for writing center directors to get more institutional respect was to have more of us in tenure track positions. Even though I would still like to see this happen, I am no longer so sure that even if most writing center directors were tenure track, faculty general attitudes about the worth of writing center work would change.

To begin with, as Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns point out, writing center research is not regarded as a "real" intellectual pursuit by those outside the writing center community:

> The tenure-line appointment usually indicates a recognition of the academic value of the facility, and the mere candidacy for tenure means the director, at least, is not at the edges of status, security, and power as are the other center workers. Typically, however, in everyday practice many center directors suffer severe stress or conflict because the demands of directing . . . are simply not seen by other members of the department or the administration as being part of the intellectual work of the academy. . . . At the same time, these directorial activities leave little time for the more standard forms of intellectual academic work, particularly disciplinary research and journal publishing. Furthermore, when directors do engage in this kind of

intellectual work, it often is, and should be, about the work of the center, a topic that may not have the cachet of a literary scholar's analysis of a sixteenth-century poem. (69)

What Shamoon and Burns highlight is the double-bind tenure line writing center directors may find themselves in: In order to garner institutional respect, power, and authority, the writing center director (usually) needs a tenure-track position. But, when writing center directors do engage in the kind of intellectual work valued by the academy, they usually study the writing center, and scholarship on writing centers is itself marginalized since writing centers are not thought of in the larger academic community as viable sites for research.

This double-bind is part of the narrative surrounding the position of the writing center director. The narrative I am referring to is what I call the "feminization of the writing center narrative," and one of its primary functions is to code the position of writing center director as "inferior," regardless of rank. In reflecting on my campus visits and the dissonance between the official and unofficial rhetoric surrounding the writing center director position, I have come to believe that the feminization narrative is an underlying, powerful force shaping not only attitudes and perceptions of the writing center, in general, but also in influencing opinions about the position of a writing center director.

My reading of the feminization of the writing center narrative has been influenced by Sue Ellen Holbrook's assessment of composition studies. Holbrook suggests that composition teaching is seen as "women's work" because it exhibits four telling characteristics: It is undervalued, undercompensated, service-oriented, and employs a "disproportionate number of women" (202). Accordingly, composition studies can be described as feminized because it is "associated with

feminine attributes and populated by the female gender" (201). This description of composition easily maps on to writing centers since we are seen as nurturing, service-oriented places and, as a quick review of the literature will tell you, greatly undervalued. Indeed, this association of writing centers with women and women's work is commonplace in the writing center community, and my research suggests that women are indeed overrepresented in writing center work.

Our professional conversations, however, do not seem to pay much attention to the gender politics inherent in this narrative, and as a consequence, the writing center community itself loses some of its own agency in changing the way the narrative affects our professional circumstances. For example, the Writing Centers Research Project for academic year 2000-01 designed a thirty question survey asking for data on writing center directors' rank, number of years in position, highest educational level attained, along with questions about the number of hours centers were open, the number of contact hours per week tutors were available, and even about the square footage of centers. But, significantly, these surveys did not ask about the sex of the directors (or tutors or clients). This omission became even more striking to me when I read that the stated purpose of the survey was "to gather data about as many writing centers as possible. . . . The items on the survey *reflect information frequently requested by writing center personnel as they seek benchmarks for their reports and for planning*" (emphasis added). If these survey questions reflect the most frequently requested information about writing centers—information requested by writing center personnel themselves—then it is clear that sexual politics are not at the forefront of the ways we think about what we do and how we do it.

I would like to propose, however, that they should be. Sexual politics are embedded in the history and present of

the writing center community and are representative of a problem in the academy writ large. According to a report by the American Association of University Professors:

> As female participation in the profession [higher education] increases, women remain more likely than men to obtain appointments in lower paying types of institutions and disciplines. Indeed, even controlling for category of institution, gender disparities continue and in some cases have increased, because women are more often found in those specific institutions (and disciplines) that pay lower salaries. (Benjamin 1)

The writing center, then, is a microsite where a macro-institutional problem is manifested. Given this situation, I can imagine how and why the faculty on those search committees who questioned my desire to do writing center work had my best interests at heart. But, at the same time, I am reluctant to let this issue continue lurking beneath the official conversations search committees in English departments have. I am reluctant to have the writing center community acknowledge these issues with little more than a shrug and a nod to "the way it has always been."

Because women make up a majority of the writing center community, I feel we have a duty to begin considering the ways the feminization narrative affects all levels of writing center work. We need to start asking questions about who is using the writing center and why (and its corollary, who is not using it and why). We need a better understanding of who chooses to work in writing centers and how and why they come to that decision in spite of the negative coding of the position. We need an accurate account of the number of women and men directing writing centers and a collation of that information with data on the institutional rank of female and male writing center directors. Importantly, we need to ask if male writing center directors are

more likely than females to hold tenure track positions. We need to look at our journals and our international organization and see if there is a gendered nature to whose voices are heard most frequently.

Besides looking at these (and many, many other) important issues surrounding the gender politics of the writing center, I would like to see the writing center community take more control over the feminization narrative that codes so much of what we do and how we are situated in the academy. We are a large professional community with important relationships with (and often, access to) faculty and administrators across the institution. Instead of tacitly accepting the place we have been put in, if we are going to be identified as a space where women do women's work, then let's start to make some noise (to co-opt the title of Beth Boquet's wonderful new book) about it and use our feminized identity as a call to action that positions us as a proactive campus and academic space.

1. It is important to emphasize that I am talking specifically about the writing center administrator *position* and not the writing center administrator as a person. Specific writing center directors may be greatly valued and respected at their institutions for the work they do and the people they are. I am concerned with the institutional recognition, in the form of academic rank, of the *position* of a writing center director.

2. In conjunction with my dissertation research, I designed a survey instrument to collect demographic data from a sample of college and university writing centers across the United States. Potential participants were identified using the alphabetical listing of writing center directors in the back of the 1998-99 Directory of Writing Centers. Community college, high school, and international writing centers were not included in this survey. Ninety-three writing center directors were identified and sent a package containing a cover letter explaining my research, the thirteen-question survey, and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. Directors were asked to use data from the 1998-99 academic year.

The chart below summarizes both my data and data from the WCRP from 2000-01.

Total		Non-tenure	Tenure
My survey	N= 57	N = 38 (67%)	N = 19 (33%)
WCRP	N = 193	N = 112 (58%)	N = 81 (42%)

Sex and rank of writing center directors based on my survey.

	Female	Male
Total	N = 50 (88%)	N = 7 (12%)
Non-tenure	N = 34 (68%)	N = 4 (57%)
Tenure	N = 16 (32%)	N = 3 (43%)

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A treasure hunt in the writing lab: Training new and returning consultants

Both directors and consultants strive to show clients that a lab is a place of discovery, not just a warehouse of information (Lunsford). It has to be admitted, though, that a prime reason clients knock on our doors is to ask for quick answers to such questions as, "How do I cite a videotape using Turabian?" or "What is a comma splice?" or "What is a thesis statement anyway?" No lab plays a storehouse role exclusively, but providing answers is, undeniably, part of being a writing lab.

Providing information is no easy task. Consultants (or directors, for that matter) cannot carry all the information in their heads. Nor should they try. As Samuel Johnson said, *"Knowledge is of two kinds: we know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it"*(Boswell).

How, then, can a director train consultants—especially newly hired ones—in what a lab offers so they can readily secure the resources for answering clients' questions? A director's walking consultants around the lab like a tour guide, pointing out the sources (the most used, the most beloved) is not sufficient. New consultants often forget which book helps with Turabian footnotes and which handout is useful for clients writing history papers; after all, as new workers, they must absorb myriad details about a lab.

The treasure hunt concept

A possible solution to helping new workers locate as well as know key resources (books, dictionaries, thesauri, handbooks, and handouts) is to use a treasure hunt. Lab directors probably experienced such an exercise during their MA or PhD course work when they had to explore their university's library by locating a rather inconsequential detail. (How long, for example, is the 1975 edition of J. H. Freese's translation of Aristotle's *'Art' of Rhetoric*–Loeb Classical Library? The answer, by the way, is 493 pages, counting the index.)

The treasure hunt for a lab, though, eschews such minutiae. Instead, a treasure hunt focuses on any part of the writing process (invention, editing, transitions, paragraphs) and with any types of students (students writing personal statements for graduate school, history students using Turabian, or international students worried about *a*, *an*, or *the*). Best of all, it is not a director but the veteran consultants who create the exercise.

Creating a treasure hunt exercise

- To create a treasure hunt, experienced consultants write both the questions and answers

- On a piece of paper, they write a question using a client's phrasing. For instance, "I have trouble with transitions, and my paper doesn't make sense? How can I make my writing flow? My professor said my writing is too choppy?"

- On a separate sheet of paper, veterans provide the answer, telling where *to go* in the lab to locate help (on what desk? in what file drawer?), what *source*(s) to look at (thesaurus? *Harbrace Handbook*?) and what possible *answer(s)* to tell clients.

Only after new consultants complete the Treasure Hunt do they, then, look at the answers provided by their experienced colleagues.

Samples from a Treasure Hunt

Typical questions, with possible answers, include:

Sample One

Question posed by the client:
" A student whose second language is English enters the lab and asks, "I don't understand the difference between 'sitting *around* the house' versus 'sitting *in* the house.' Can you explain the correct usage to me?"

Go to: the bookshelf labeled "Helping International Students." Sources:
1) *NTC's English Idiom Dictionary*
2) *Longman Dictionary of American English*
3) *Harbrace Handbook* (most recent edition)

Answer(s): My advice is to show the client how our idiomatic phrases are used in the first source (*NTC's English Idiom Dictionary*). Certain prepositional phrases simply must be accepted. The *Longman* can show the various uses of a specific preposition in English, however. *Harbrace* can show the rules governing general usage of prepositions (See 1c and 22a.).

Sample Two

Question posed by the client:
"My professor says that I can't just make a quote its own sentence. What do I have to do with it?"

Go to: the Writing Lab's file drawer on rhetorical concerns. Source(s): See

the file folders "Quotation Framing" and "Quotations: How to Handle Them"

Answer(s): Have the client do the following:
• write a passage that identifies the source, the position it takes, and the quotation itself.
• write a sentence offering one reason for your position.
• write a sentence explaining how your position and that of your source are related.
• combine the above to create a rough paragraph and then revise and organize the paragraph, adding transitions.

Sample Three
Question posed by the client:
"I really don't know what my professor is looking for in a paper. I have the assignment, but I wish I could see a paper he has already graded."

Go to: the file drawer with sample papers. Source(s): Find the subject and the professor for whom your client is writing a paper. If your client's professor has not provided a sample paper, check the file drawer on rhetorical concerns for any handouts applicable to the client's subject or paper.

Answer(s): Pull a sample paper from the appropriate file. Let the client examine the paper, but do not allow him or her to photocopy or remove the paper from the Writing Lab.

Benefits to experienced consultants

Creating a treasure hunt offers experienced workers numerous benefits. Their walking around the lab to look up answers means they are becoming re-familiar with the resources, thus increasing their efficiency and effectiveness as tutors. As a veteran consultant noted, "Writing up the answers helped me to slow down and reflect on details

I had already internalized as a tutor." More importantly, though, hunting for the treasures boosts their egos by showing them how much they have learned as tutors and how much they can share with others.

Besides building confidence, the treasure hunt helps veteran consultants gain new insight into their own learning curve. All too often, experienced consultants, with only a year of tutoring, believe they have "mastered" the fine art of being consultants. When writing up the treasure hunt, though, veteran consultants discover many questions they had yet not figured out. As one veteran consultant said about creating the treasure hunt, "I could think about questions I had not previously solved, such as the proper MLA citation for an InFoTrac article." Another veteran consultant confessed that he had not realized that more than one resource might solve a client's problem. Consultants, who once thought they knew most of the answers, teach themselves more. One experienced consultant used the opportunity to study a grammar issue she herself had always found "disturbing." The client's question was, "My teacher says that I write passive sentences, and they need to be active. What's that mean?" The consultant said she had enjoyed researching the answer. Instead of feeling rushed when a client is sitting next to her, waiting for her to look it up in a handbook, the consultant had the luxury of time to study about voice in verbs. Crafting and then providing the answer, she now feels better prepared when this grammatical issue arises.

Benefits for new consultants and for directors

New consultants do become more familiar with a lab's layout and resources, but a treasure hunt accomplishes more: it also fosters a bond between new and veteran workers. Since experienced colleagues are usually nearby in the lab when new workers are hunting for answers, new consultants readily seek their help with

specific concerns, thus promoting a dialogue among them. The questions themselves are also a preview. Since veteran consultants have generated them based on real consultations, these authentic questions give new consultants invaluable experience into what to expect from clients.

And the benefits for a director?

The treasure hunt questions are barometer for what experienced consultants see as the lab's top concerns. The most frequently asked topics focused on writing literature papers; editing for grammar and usage; documenting with APA, MLA, and Turabian; helping international students; preparing for postgraduate tests, (such as GMAT, GRE, or the MCAT). So, I found—at least for my lab—the treasure hunt offered insight into the clients' interests.

Conclusion

The hunt is on. Directors are always searching for novel ways to acclimate new consultants to a lab and to tap into the experience of veteran consultants. Though a treasure hunt takes time to create, it helps directors to train new consultants and— ironically—to retrain returning ones. As one veteran consultant noted, "Although our lab has all these handbooks and handouts, we consultants usually just work with clients and, then, let them go. Now, we know better what is available to help students." Samuel Johnson, then, was right: it's knowing *where* to find the information that is the true treasure.

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Southeastern Writing Center Association Conference

Call for Proposals
Charleston, SC
February 10-12, 2005
"Writing as Learning: Understanding and Promoting Intellectual Growth and Critical Thinking in the Writing Center"

We invite faculty, administrators, and students to explore this year's theme and to submit proposals for individual and panel presentations, roundtable discussions, workshops, and poster sessions.

Proposals should include a title, the names and contact information of all presenters, the presentation format, a description of the presentation (250 words for individuals and posters; 500 words for panels and roundtables), and a 50-word abstract. We encourage you to submit proposals electronically at the SWCA Web site <www.swca.us>. If necessary, proposals may be mailed to Trixie Smith, Middle Tennessee State University, Department of English, P.O. Box 70, Murfreesboro, TN 37132 (postmarked by Oct 10). Questions should also be addressed to Trixie Smith at tgsmith@mtsu.edu. All presenters must be members of SWCA by the time of the conference. Electronic proposals are due Oct 15, 2004.

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

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