THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Volume 29, Number 10 Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing June, 2005

...FROM THE EDITOR...

The power of reflecting on one's experience and sharing insights with others is particularly evident in this issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Harry Denny's account of collaborating with high school faculty in an online project explores some of the pedagogical/theoretical gaps that exist between secondary school instructors and those in post-secondary institutions. Similarly, Doug Enders' account of how his writing center was assessed by the institutional researcher at his college highlights the truth of a recent comment on the Writing Program Administrators (WPA) listserv by Ed White: "Remember White's law: Assess thyself or assessment will be done unto you." Yet another self-study, by Dan Melzer sheds light on how chat room synchronous tutoring can be more effective. Finally, Chanel James shares tutoring strategies that help students develop a voice.

With this issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter,* we bring Vol. 29 to a close and look forward to gearing up again next fall, when the September issue of Vol. 30 begins. For those of us anticipating quiet time during the summer (or winter, for our Down Under readers), I wish you quality R&R time and great success in achieving the forever tantalizing effort to catch up on all those things you meant to do during the academic year.

• *Muriel Harris, editor*

...INSIDE...

Confessions of first-time virtual collaborators: When college tutors mentor high school students in cyberspace

In Wiring the Writing Center, Eric Hobson questions the possibility of online tutoring to meet the needs of novice writers who require "practice [in] the demanding activities of critical thinking, audience analysis and accommodation, idea invention and development, [and] implementation of conventions within specific discourse communities" (E. H. Hobson xviii). Indeed, the pressure to accommodate those needs in face-to-face (f2f) sessions is daunting enough, and removing the roles "live" conversation and interaction play in tutoring confounds matters all the more. As online writing labs (OWLs) move beyond service as resource centers and into distance learning/teaching, critical issues of pedagogy quickly come to the foreground. While we contemplate matching progressive pedagogy to specific contexts, we must simultaneously grapple with political and social cross-

currents when different teaching environments commingle. During a recent e-tutoring pilot project that involved my institution, Stony Brook University, and a local Long Island school district, we re-discovered the limitations of tutoring performed by way of email exchanges and developed a better appreciation for the needs of teacher buy-in and support.

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Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is approximately 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutors' Column essays, in MLA format. If possible, please send as attached files in an e-mail to wln@purdue.edu. Otherwise, send hard copy and a computer disk or CD-ROM, and 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 an October issue).

Planning and executing the pilot

Our collaboration initially began as a way to build connections between the university's new graduate certificate program in composition studies and the school district. To grow a foundation for conversations about pedagogy, the university writing center's e-tutoring service was offered as a resource for the district. The cooperating teachers and their students would gain additional voices and one-to-one support for composition instruction, and they also would be exposed to collaborative, process-oriented pedagogy. For the writing center, the pilot project offered the prospect of training and exposing tutors to e-tutorials without being flooded with requests from the university's large student body. To bring the faculty up to speed on writing center pedagogy, we met to review the college's OWL and sample e-tutorial exchanges. I also provided the faculty with readings on pedagogy for virtual and f2f tutoring from Gillespie and Lerner, Hobson, and Cooper et al. Following that meeting, instructors from Advanced Placement (AP) and basic writing sections volunteered their classes to participate in the pilot. At mid-term, the initial exchanges circulated between the college and high school. For students in the AP classes, their essays had varying degrees of efficacy, so the tutors tended to push the students to hone their argumentation—to move beyond summative information and toward critical engagement and explanation. For the basic writing samples, the students' strengths and weaknesses were less easy to address because their prompt was attempting to build confidence with expression. Since they did not have an explicit genre or template to weigh these students' essays against, the tutors wound up—in an Elbow and Belanoff mode of peer review—mirroring what they understood the writers were saying and asking for greater development of ideas or insight.

Despite the promising start, the tutors' responses did not live up to instructor expectations. In my planning discussions with the tutors and instructors, I thought we shared a consensus that the tutors would give peer-response feedback or would be directed by the students toward the specific forms of response. We also agreed that the tutors would avoid evaluative responses (ostensibly "correcting" and grading students' performance). As a result, the tutors' responses posed open-ended questions related to argument and paragraph development, yet the students, teachers, and administrator wanted more directive evaluation. In spite of our conversations and readings about the tutoring process, the high school participant instructors had expected the tutors to serve as initial respondents to student papers—a sort of dialog that the high school participants found absent in the tutors' response. The teachers and students wanted corrective and assessment-minded feedback (not probing questions [e.g., "What do you think about…?"], and affective responses [e.g., "I like. . . ."]). Rather than view commenting on papers as part of a recursive, generative process, the students and instructors wanted linear, end-focused comments (e.g., "What grade will I get?" or "Is this good enough to pass?). The instructors also initially reacted to spelling and prose errors in the tutors' responses, but the quality of their prose improved when I told the tutors to avoid the informality most typically associate with Internet communication. As the project came to a close, I came to realize the reaction to error was a proxy for more abstract, substantive problems.

Debriefing and reconciling the outcomes

At the close of the pilot, I participated in a staff development conference with middle and high school

teachers at the district. We discussed sample e-tutorial responses and solicited faculty insight on their strengths and weaknesses. The group liked the depth of the tutors' responses, but the faculty also spoke of the need to clarify tutor/teacher response roles (e.g., How to clarify among cooperating teachers that the tutors are peer responders, not surrogate instructors?) as well as the medium's genre and prose expectations (e.g., What are the conventions of prose in a virtual or online venue?). We also talked about strategies for overcoming these problems to foster greater support and willingness to participate in the program. The faculty was less concerned with speed of response than surface polish of the tutors' prose, and we also decided that the tutors ought to feel the e-tutorial exchanges can take on a dialogic quality (as opposed to one iteration of the request/response cycle). We never reconciled the potentially conflicting claims of wanting more informal dialog and of expecting formal, "clean" prose (Can e-mail dialog be inviting, engaging and formally correct at the same time?). During the project, students only offered one iteration of exchange with the tutors although they were not discouraged from continuing dialog with the tutors by the teachers, administrators, or me.

From the in-service session, I concluded that the instructors appeared to have a greater understanding of the possibilities and limitations of e-tutoring. The e-tutorials have interlocutors who can be hyper-aware of surface error, so moving forward, the tutors need to be better attuned to their audience(s) and bracket their impulse toward casual, conversational writing. With high school students (unlike our usual college audience), the e-tutorials have multiple audiences; their readings are not exclusive to the student, but can be taken up by the teacher, parents, district officials, etc. Among the college students with whom my tutors usually mentor, we never get feedback from parents, department chairs or other personnel, but we do infrequently get a professor who responds to shared e-tutorials (usually thanking the tutor). The instructors' reaction to the tutors' prose was not about refusing a teachable moment in collaboration with the tutors, but more about positioning themselves in relation to the tutors with whom they had no relationship. The teachers were reasserting their authority and status in connection with individuals they viewed as interlopers. The teachers, as I would later learn, did not view the tutors as complementing their work and offering another option for instruction; instead, they saw the tutors as intrusive and as acting as a proxy for administrative oversight.

The teacher in-service brought to light the notion that the tutors were understood as experts, not as figures engaged in a learning curve; the teachers assumed the tutors held a mastery of discourse conventions as well as facility with communicating that knowledge to others. Though the tutors may know a good deal about college-level writing, their ability to effectively mentor and share that insight was a work in progress. My goal had been to complement that growth, not assume it. The instructors assumed the tutors ought to respond to student writing as they would—marking papers for prose and providing evaluative, corrective feedback. Still this mindset was at odds with the tutors' pedagogy: they had been taught to understand initial drafts as works in progress that ought to have comments directed toward revisioning ideas and organization. However, the teachers viewed writing as a linear act, a march toward correction, not an organic, individual process. The means were a secondary concern to the material ends: efficiently produced student writing.

As the AP instructor and I reconnected to plan a presentation at the Northeast Writing Centers Association (NEWCA), we agreed that communication at every juncture in such collaborations was crucial and that interference—be it technological or human—could easily undermine student, tutor, faculty and administrator security and credibility with the project. The district curriculum supervisor, as the instructor reported, would use our talks about the project's progress as an occasion to query her about pedagogy and assignment methods. Reflecting back on those exchanges, the teacher said had she been less secure as an instructor about her position and methods, she would have walked away from the pilot because it had become a medium for surveillance and criticism. Rather than serve as a support or independent voice in the teaching dynamic, I had (and the tutors by extension) become a party to already present institutional tensions over curriculum supervision and teacher management.

Coupled with that awkwardness, the teacher reported that the students often did not understand the tutors' comments, so she wound up needing to translate our comments as well as produce her own evaluations and response to her students' writing. Instead of diminishing her voice as "expert" and opening up the responding dynamic, we were exacerbating her work and making it all the more labor-intensive. Even more, she reported that our individual interaction was strained because we talk entirely by e-mail, so she worried about me misinterpreting her messages and vice versus. Rather than talking with each other, coordinating understanding, and debriefing results and feelings, we let virtual communication bear the brunt, yet its expected transparency was anything but.

Towards next steps and the future

After our NEWCA presentation and as the semester came to a close, the cooperating instructor and I renewed our commitment to continue the project in the coming school year. As I move forward and reflect on the process, I

have learned that my naïveté is one of the biggest challenges to overcome. Knowing the possibilities of and need for e-tutoring and high school writing center work, I had not anticipated problems both methodological and political. In my eagerness to get the project going, I had expected peer tutoring process to work well regardless of context, and I had not thought enough about or asked the participants about already existing dynamics around pedagogy and management relations. The pilot project did not fully appreciate the lay of the land before we added the variable of tutoring. All involved had not considered what happens when vastly different institutional teaching cultures commingle. To put it a bit differently, my tutors had a strong sense of discourse community conventions in the university-context as well as effective means of teaching them, but the tutors were unprepared for negotiating the means of teaching those ways of writing for another population traversing between secondary and higher education systems. A similar situation faced the district personnel and students: they were aware of their community conventions, dynamics, and needs, but they did not (could not or would not) communicate them well to "outsiders."

Responsibility for learning seemed to transfer from the students to the tutors, and they were viewed as service workers whose trade involved transmitting intellectual capital. Failure to learn was a product of bad service, not of the dialectic, interaction, or context. The students, as always already privileged subjects in the dynamics, were never faulted in our talks; they were agents who consumed and produced but never erred. Since these students came from a privileged district, was our inability to interrogate the role of these students rooted in their family wealth and status? Would the tutors, teachers and administrators be so easily suspect in poor school district, or would we project problems on the individual students? Assuming we next worked with an economically-disadvantaged community school district, would the appreciation-factor for our tutoring garner more willingness to collaborate, or would the dynamic be more strained because we could be viewed as colonialist do-gooders? Would the tutors be seen as interlopers once again? Steve Parks, Lori Salem and Eli Goldblatt have worked to build bridges between Temple University in Philadelphia and local high schools with a degree of success, but their project involved sending tutors to schools and setting up writing center spaces to assist with state-mandated writing assessments and other genres.

Besides having a better understanding of institutional context and stronger awareness of the possibility of meshing our pedagogies, I would want to better integrate the tutors and students so that there would be more comfort for dialog and mutual understanding. Transferring this sort of ice-breaking back to our university e-tutoring is not logistically possible, but that sort of work could happen in initial e-mails when we outline the limit and possibilities of what we do. Future projects will also need to include more focused discussion between the faculty and me about their expectations (Are the tutors the first responders to the students' papers? Are the tutors offering peer response/reader response or evaluative commentary? Are the tutors commenting once or on-going? What kinds of discourse practices and conventions do the teachers assume?). Ideally, we would figure out a way for the tutors and students to join this conversation. I would also solicit more talk and modeling of sample student/tutor exchanges to facilitate better understanding between all the parties. For example, we should have initially taken a writing sample, produced teacher and tutor responses, and then debriefed the different ways of responding. From whatever insight we induced, we would then re-negotiate expectations. My mistake was not getting the teachers to talk about what they noticed in the college-level responses and whether that sort of dialog matched their expectations. I now know they interpreted those initial exemplars as initial teacher corrections/evaluations rather than as reader-responses that the tutors typically give.

Beyond these insights, this project has one final lesson that we at colleges and universities must learn. As high-stakes assessment games move closer and closer to our campuses (if they haven't already arrived), the very dynamics and accompanying anxiety that I saw in this high school (and that I know is happening throughout "No Child Left Behind" America) will also arrive, and we must develop strategies and alliances to deal with them. Just as in K-12 education, teachers at the college-level will soon find writing and communication being assessed, and the efficacy and efficiency of their pedagogies will be under scrutiny. Though the degree of our academic and curricular freedom varies between institutional contexts, teaching to competency tests is not yet widely practiced (though many institutions have "rising junior" tests or "exit" exams in composition courses). Recently the State of New York mandated that the State University of New York (SUNY) institutions assess outcomes in critical thinking, communication skills, and writing, and schools are encouraged to use standardized tests that sample twenty percent of their populations. This exploratory testing (and their descriptive results of what students can and cannot do in timed writing situations) will likely yield to performance

expectations and goals for institutions and individual teachers (I imagine: X percentage must be performing at Y level, or administrative oversight will become more intense). Regardless of the Orwellian dimensions of assessment regimes and their effects on classroom instruction, I am committed to the notion that writing centers can provide a support role for teachers and students alike. Tutors can facilitate cross-talk that helps students learn and that de-mystifies the culture and expectations of testing and composition instruction, but they can only do that job well when students and teachers alike view them as risk-free support, not as interlopers.

I remain optimistic about collaboration both technological and face-to-face between high schools and colleges. The Long Island school district with which I worked will likely continue our project, and we now know what to do better and what to avoid. Most importantly, all involved have a keener understanding of the stakes and political implications of what we do; I only wish my learning curve had not been so steep. To piggy-back on conclusions offered by Childers et al. in "Virtual High School Writing Centers":

> [T]echnology should be used to support and enhance writing, thinking and learning…. Fac[e]-to-face interaction is a vital part of what we do and why we do it. That part of our job involves much more than just writing, thinking and learning; it involves verbal exchange, negotiation and socialization skills in a 'low-risk' environment. (149)

At the close of our initial collaboration this year, we did facilitate those three fundamental goals, but our success at effective dialog and mitigating the risky environment for students and teachers alike needs work. Like most enterprises, we have much to build on, and I look forward to working with my colleagues at the school district to address them.

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New and Forthcoming from IWCA Press

Byron Stay, General Editor of The IWCA Press, has announced that their collaboration with Erlbaum Press has already resulted in one book being published: *By Any Other Name: Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Academy*, co-edited by Beverly Moss, Nels Highberg, and Melissa Nicolas. A second book project, Jenny Ariail's *In the Center: Affect in the Writing Process* is currently being revised.

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Assessing the writing center: A qualitative tale of a quantitative study

Historically, writing centers have had to justify their existence within the academy. Through reports on the number of students served, descriptions of the kinds of work center staff perform, and stories of student success and faculty satisfaction, writing center administrators have attested to the value of their centers. Increasingly, however, they are being asked to do this by measuring the writing center's impact on student grades or retention through quantitative analysis. This trend poses a challenge for many of us who, as Cindy Johanek has observed, have "embraced the anecdote, the story, as a means of and the form for our research" to the "near abandonment of research that seeks and analyzes numerical data"(10-11). Since the demand for quantitative research won't go away anytime soon, it makes sense for writing center administrators to become more knowledgeable about how quantitative research works. Unfortunately, this can be a challenge for those of us who have been trained in literature and composition, rather than mathematics or social sciences, where quantitative research is a staple. But sometimes we don't have a choice: in my case, administration decided to initiate its own quantitative study and enlisted me, the writing center director, to help statistically measure the Writing Center's impact on student academic success. My experience with this study, which follows, illustrates some of the difficulties in setting up a useful quantitative study as well as the potential pitfalls involved when administration rather than the writing center stands at the helm of a study of this sort.

I work in a small religious-affiliated, liberal arts school plagued by retention problems: thirty-six percent of our freshmen drop out after their first year and fewer than thirty-three percent of our students go on to graduate (*North Carolina Wesleyan College Comprehensive Fact Book, 2003*). Like so many other schools in this situation, my institution is desperate to increase retention. Toward this end, the president of my college asked the Institutional Researcher (IR) to study and report on the factors that contribute to attrition and retention at our institution so that the results could be used to inform future policy decisions for student recruitment and academic support.

In November 2002, the IR asked me to provide him with information about student use of our Writing Center for inclusion in his study. Curious about what could be said for the Writing Center's role in student retention and academic success, I supplied him with the array of data he requested, including the number of student visits to the Writing Center, broken down by course, student gender, ethnicity, geographical origin, and major. To this information the IR added student high school GPA, SAT scores, grades from previously taken general education courses, and information regarding student socio-economic background. The IR intended to take all this data, enter it into an SPSS program, and find a correlation between the number of student visits to the Writing Center and the student's academic success. Once produced, the report would provide the president with information to inform his policymaking while supplying me with data to guide my direction and research of the Writing Center.

Although promised results by late December 2002, I did not receive them for another ten months. During my wait, busy with day-to-day matters of running a writing center and teaching, I had little to do with the study other than to check in periodically with the IR to find out the status of the study's results. Other than providing the initial data, I played no role in framing the questions for study and remained largely ignorant of the study's process. As things turned out, the results proved far less interesting than what I learned about the process of generating them and what makes a valid quantitative study.

The study tested the following hypothesis: Does student use of the Writing Center make a difference in student academic success and/or retention, or more specifically, does the number of visits to the Writing Center correlate to higher student grades? The IR performed two sets of tests, using a linear regression and a multiple regression to look for the above correlation. Performing a linear regression allowed the IR to see the overall grade distribution according to the number of student visits made to the Center. Using a multiple regression test allowed him to look for a correlation between the number of writing center visits and student performance in grades by holding other variables constant. In other words, using this test, he could take several snapshots of the Writing Center's impact according to other factors like a student's SAT or high school GPA or socio-economic background.

Initially, the study included all students who visited the Writing Center in 2001-2002, about 300 students, making 750 visits in total. Once the numbers were crunched, however, the study failed to produce any significant correlation between writing center visits and grade outcomes. The linear regression produced nothing more than a random distribution of grades, and the multiple regression tests couldn't iso-

late enough variables to show a correlation between writing center visits and grade performance. In some situations, the data sample was too small to be statistically relevant. In others, where a trend might have been discerned, the confidence interval, which John Allen Paulos defines as "a band within which the true value of the characteristic in question will lie with a certain probability" (*A Mathematician Reads* 153), didn't signal a reliable correlation between writing center visits and student success. In other words, the study couldn't prove a causal relationship—as opposed to a coincidental relationship—between the number of visits to the Writing Center and student GPA outcome.

Dissatisfied with this outcome, the IR sought to narrow the study to only new freshmen, roughly 100, hoping that by eliminating a number of other variables, he could determine more clearly the Writing Center's role in student achievement. Unfortunately, this approach also failed to produce significant results. A third attempt followed, limiting the study further to 66 freshmen who were members of specific first-year courses in math, history, and English. Despite this considerably narrowed focus, the results remained the same: the data failed to present trends that indicated that the numbers of student visits contributed one way or another to student success. It wasn't possible, for example, to know if the Writing Center, the instructors, students' backgrounds, their motivation, some other factor, or most likely a combination of these was responsible for student outcomes. In the end, all that the IR could conclude was that grades weren't a useful measure of the effect of the Writing Center on student performance.

The IR's conclusion wasn't a great surprise since others had arrived at it before. In her keynote address at the 2000 National Writing Centers Assocation Conference in Baltimore, Molly Wingate presented her own findings suggesting that, on average, writing center users on her campus achieved higher GPAs than non-users. She admitted, however, that while this statistic seemed to reflect favorably on her center, she couldn't make too many claims about the effect that writing center visits had on student GPAs. She pointed out that such a statistic was merely descriptive and should not be used for interpretive purposes (Wingate). It may have been the case, for example, that the students who used Wingate's writing center would have achieved higher GPAs even without the use of writing center tutorials.

In "Choosing Beans Wisely," Neal Lerner further illustrates the difficulty of using grades to measure writing center influence on academic success. Lerner dismisses the results of a quantitative study that he published earlier in "Counting Beans," in which he attempted to determine which students benefited the most from using the writing center. In that early study, by comparing students with similar SAT scores, Lerner determined that "students with the weakest writing skills . . . [who] came to the Writing Center most often have benefited the most" (2). In revisiting this study, Lerner comes to realize that his conclusion was flawed statistically and logically for several reasons. First, after performing a second, longer study, he finds that the assumption "that students with lower SAT verbal scores will do more poorly in expository writing than those with higher scores" is statistically false. Second, he has to reject his assumption that final grades in first-year writing courses are an appropriate indication of a student's writing ability. Other factors such as "attendance policies, timeliness of assignment completion, effort and motivation all distort that final course grade as a true representative of students' skills as writers" (3). Third, Lerner finds fault with his earlier assumption that "students will receive the same grade in first-year composition regardless of instructor" (3). Such an assumption, he argues, fails to consider "teacher effects," such as the relativity of grading practices that make some teachers tougher than others. These realizations lead him to conclude "reporting average grades across individual classes is not a particularly sound research method" (3).

My story could have ended here, like Lerner's, with a report of a failed correlation study, but my IR, despite coming up empty-handed three times, remained determined to produce a "clean study" that under scrutiny would show the Writing Center's positive effect on student academic achievement. To do this, he proposed creating a writing test for students to take during our college's Institutional Assessment Day that would compare the outcomes of students who had visited the Writing Center in preparation for the test with those who hadn't. The test, which would ask students to write an essay in response to a prompt, would reflect the skills addressed at the Writing Center, things like idea development, organization, and use of grammar and mechanics. Such a test would better measure the real focus of writing centers—writing—instead of grades, which had proved so problematic for Wingate, Lerner, and us. Moreover, using a broad sample of students could theoretically eliminate such factors as a student's coursework, motivation, and years of study, which previously clouded up our attempt to find a correlation between writing center visits and student achievement. Although not perfect, such a study, the IR argued, would produce what he believed would be a statistically sound measurement of the Writing Center's impact on student academic success.

At this point, I questioned if I wanted to go any further. I wasn't convinced

that I wanted to hang my writing center's reputation on such a study, which verged on assessment for assessment's sake and promised to be a significant bureaucratic imposition on students, tutors, and their evaluators. We already have enough of those. Although examining writing would seem to be an obviously better measure of a writing center's work than grades, would this one-shot essay really be a more valid measure of the Writing Center's effectiveness—after all, it seems to devalue the writing process that is so much a part of writing center pedagogy? Would we find a significant correlation or would we again be reporting what Paulos identifies as "purely accidental correlations"? (*Innumeracy* 120). In the end, I had to ask myself, would this proposed study translate into better teaching and learning—the ultimate purpose of assessment?

On further thought, it seemed to me that an even better measure of a writing center's effectiveness would study multiple papers written by students who did or did not visit the Writing Center over a period of time. Because writing ability is not usually transformed overnight and may even go through a period of regression as students apply what they have learned about writing in a tutorial, it would make better sense to look at the results of students' entrance and exit essays to and from the freshman composition sequence. Such a longitudinal study, however, would require time: time for students to take these tests, time for graders to be normed and then to grade the tests, and time for evaluators to track, input, and analyze all this information. Moreover, to grade each facet of a paper in terms of its development, organization, and grammar would involve more time than current holistic procedures require and opens up a whole other problem—whether those facets add up to the same estimation of writing that holistic grading does. For these reasons, I put the study on hold.

After arriving at this decision, I found out, to my dismay, that the IR had already presented the President with a retention study in May, 2003 (four months prior to my review of the study's results). After all the time and effort involved in compiling and crunching numbers for the writing center study, the report, "NCWC Retention Highlights 1997-2001," contained no mention of the writing center study, nor for that matter, any effectiveness studies of *any* other academic programs put in place to facilitate student academic success. Despite presenting no statistical evidence—positive or negative—as support, the IR concluded in his report that "to enhance student persistence the College must either recruit better-prepared students or conduct a major expansion of the remedial programs. However, since recruiting better students takes years, expansion of the remedial program [i.e., the Writing Center and other student academic support services] is the only option likely to significantly impact retention in the short term"(Newkirk, "NCWC Retention Highlights" 24).

Although favorable to the Writing Center, such a conclusion seemed irresponsible to me, and it underscored how vulnerable even the best of studies are, whether quantitative or qualitative, to politics and administrative deadlines. Also troublesome was the way in which the IR implicitly misrepresented the Writing Center. Although he didn't mention the Center by name, when the IR referred to "remedial programs," the Center was one of the programs he had in mind. While the Center does offer some remediation, to say that is its main purpose is dangerously reductive. It undoes much of my work in trying to establish the Writing Center's reputation as a place where, "serious students do serious work"(Wingate). Moreover, this misrepresentation certainly lends credence to Neal Lerner's conclusion that those of us involved in writing centers "do need to conduct assessment in our terms, particularly before those terms are handed to us by those who might not have a clue" about what we do (4).

My experience with the quantitative study described above made several things clear to me. First, performing quantitative studies is difficult, but a few precautionary measures can help. For those of us untrained in statistics, knowing how to set up a study, what data to study, what tests to run, and how to interpret the results can be daunting. To demystify the process, take the time to understand what is being studied and how; read easy-to-understand explanations by statisticians such as John Allen Paulos; and consult with a statistician to see how to validly construct and interpret a study. Sharing our research—successful or not—may help others in the field construct their own quantitative studies and avoid unnecessary pitfalls.

Second, taking ownership of any study of the writing center is crucial. I was naïve in letting administration perform the study and dictate its terms simply because I knew the IR was better versed in doing quantitative research than I. The Writing Center could have been burned by this in a number of ways, including if the direction of the study had taken a wrong turn, if it had required a considerable human resources commitment to collect data, and, of course, if the results had negatively influenced policies affecting the Writing Center. As it turned out, I was lucky that my administration had been supportive of the Writing Center and that the IR's report was probably responsible for a budget gain the Writing Center received at a time when other budgets were being cut. Not everyone is so fortunate.

Third, my experience reaffirmed Johanek's claim that our research must reflect the contexts of our teaching and learning and that we need to acknowledge that specific contexts "demand certain research methods more than other methods"(1). Unfortunately, the study I was involved in violated this

principle. With little understanding of the Writing Center's mission or consideration for the process by which students learn to write better, the IR applied a familiar battery of SPSS tests in hopes of producing convenient correlations for administration's use. As a result, the effort was doomed by its false assumptions that the Writing Center's influence on student writing could be isolated, that the effects of writing center tutorials would necessarily manifest themselves in student writing within the convenient boundaries of a semester, and that students' writing skills could ultimately be measured in terms of a grade. While this experience left me with little that I could claim for the efficacy of the Writing Center, it did drive home the fact that when measuring the success of our writing centers, we must trust our knowledge of the work and mission of our writing centers to direct the kind of research we conduct.

In the end, like so many other choices affecting writing center policy and operations, our choice of research methods should be institution-specific, depending on administrative expectations, and available time and money. While producing quantitative results for administration can be useful, it may not always be necessary, as illustrated by the outcome of my IR's study, but if an administration changes or the institution's financial situation further tightens, then quantitative studies may come to hold greater weight than qualitative. Ironically, because performing a valid and useful quantitative study like the one I proposed earlier takes time and money, it may be "in the best of times" when money and resources are available that writing centers need to perform such studies that may save them in "the worst of times."

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Synchronous OWL tutoring: A self-study of chat room conferences

In the fall of 2001, the Writing Center at Tallahassee Community College (TCC) received a campus teaching and technology grant to begin chat room tutoring through our OWL. At the time, I worked as a face-to-face (f2f) tutor at TCC, and I was asked by the director of the Center to act as the online chat room tutor. I was excited about the prospect of tutoring entirely online, but I was also nervous. How would chat room tutoring differ from f2f tutoring? Could I establish rapport with students whom I couldn't see or hear? How exactly would typing differ from talking? To begin to investigate these questions, I decided to save the transcripts of each of my chat room sessions and analyze what was said.

This article presents the results of this analysis of thirty chat room sessions that occurred between the fall of 2001 and the spring of 2003. My main interest in looking closely at these transcripts is to explore the ways that f2f and chat room tutoring are similar and how they differ, and I focus on three aspects of tutoring: rapport, conversation style, and conventions. Although I agree with Barbara Monroe that online tutoring is a "genre unto itself" (3), I also want to show how we can draw on f2f tutoring strategies when we tutor online.

Establishing rapport in cyberspace

Jamie Thurber speaks to the importance of establishing rapport in synchronous tutoring: "Given the lack of body language," Thurber says, "personalizing the session is extremely important" (159). Joel English makes a similar argument when he says that "allowing the writer to maintain authority over the conference and establishing rapport before getting to work are staples of writing center theory and practice. Yet, when writing conferences move to synchronous computer-mediated settings, these guidelines increase in importance" (171). I would add that trying to establish rapport increases in importance online in part because it increases in difficulty.

One way I've always established rapport in f2f Writing Center conferences is small talk: I usually begin a f2f session with a bit of small talk to get the student comfortable with me. As I reviewed my chat room transcripts, however, I found precious few instances of small talk. Because I couldn't see the students' facial expressions or hear their tone of voice, I was less likely to make small talk—and likewise for the students. There were a few notable exceptions to this rule, however. The rare times that I was able to establish a solid rapport with students—enough of a rapport that small talk occurred—was with repeat visitors to the chat room. There were a handful of students who used the chat room six or seven times, and I made a personal connection with each of these students. For example, one of the students whom I'd met with before in the chat room knew that I was studying for my doctoral exams, and he asked me about them at the end of our next session. In the transcript, I use the shorthand "T" for tutor and "S" for student:

S: how are your studies coming
T: OK . . . I've got the test tomorrow. 4 hours worth.
S: good luck ill let get to studying ill talk to u on Tuesday then

With the students who were repeat visitors, chat room conversations would usually open with some small talk, and this small talk was often instigated by the students. Frequent visitors to the chat room went out of their way to strike up informal conversations before we got down to business, as this example from a tutoring session just after the Thanksgiving break reveals:

S: hey how are you? How was your Thanksgiving?
T: It was OK . . . I just got a new puppy so we stayed home instead of having it pee on my mom's carpet!
T: How was yours?
S: haha . . . what kind of puppy? My Thanksgiving was good. Glad to have a break.

These examples show that although establishing rapport through small talk was difficult, it wasn't impossible. The same can be said of my attempts to establish rapport using humor.

I find that in f2f conferences, getting students to laugh is a great way to get them comfortable talking about their writing. A sense of humor has been especially important for me in walk-in Writing Center conferences, since many of the students have never met me and may be hesitant about sharing their insecurities about writing. Before I began tutoring in the chat room, I was concerned that my sense of humor would be sacrificed in cyberspace, or wouldn't translate to students who couldn't see my facial expressions or hear the tone of my voice.

After two years of chat room tutoring, I discovered that as I chatted, and as I became more and more comfortable with the students I was working with, I did make some attempts at the kind of humor I usually include in f2f conferences. In this first example, I use

humor when I give the student advice about ways to develop an essay about sexual content on prime time television.

T: you might find a few shows . . .
T: that portray a lot of sexuality. .
T: Elimidate comes to mind . . .
T: not that I ever watch it!
S: :)

Granted, this isn't the stuff of Jerry Seinfeld, but it is an instance where I included a bit of humor and got a response from the student—a smiley-face emoticon—that shows that she recognized my attempt at levity.

In the chat room I often made jokes that didn't get quite the reaction I'd planned on, however. Sometimes it was simply because students couldn't pick up on my tone of voice. Here's an example where I'm just kidding about giving the student a hard time, but the student has taken my remark seriously:

T: ok . . . let's talk about the pro wrestling essay
T: the trash talk stuff was funny . . .
S: i swear . . . it was on tv
S: watched it at work
T: sounds like someone has been slacking at work!
S: oh no . . . they let me watch tv and do my hw

In a f2f situation, I would have exaggerated the line "sounds like someone has been slacking at work" to signal clearly to the student that I'm just joking, but in the chat room the student has mistakenly taken my comment seriously. Without cues from facial expressions and tone of voice, it's often difficult for students to understand the tutor's intent.

In the previous example, the fact that the student misunderstood me didn't have any serious repercussions, but it's not difficult to imagine a chat room tutor making an ironic or sarcastic remark that the student misunderstands and is truly offended by. Because I was concerned about this type of misunderstanding, I toned down my sense of humor in the chat room and tried to avoid sarcasm and irony. As Webster Newbold argues in "Teaching on the Internet: Transactional Writing Instruction on the World Wide Web," online teachers "must maintain an even emotional keel to avoid unintentional offense or confusion." My sense of humor did not disappear in cyberspace, but I did have to be especially careful not to offend when I used humor to establish rapport.

Chat room conversation style

Perhaps the biggest difference between my f2f and online conferences had to do with the unique style of conversation I used in the chat room. In f2f tutoring, I pride myself on being a good listener. I try not to interrupt a student when she's talking, and I always make sure that the student is following what I'm saying and vice versa. In chat room tutoring, I found that conversations were constantly overlapping, with unintentional interruptions by both the students and me. To begin discussing this, let me revisit an example I used earlier:

S: hey Dan . . . just let me know when your ready
T: I'm ready, Rachel.
S: hey how are you? How was your Thanksgiving?
T: It was OK . . . I just got a new puppy so we stayed home instead of having it pee on my mom's carpet!
T: How was yours?
S: haha . . . what kind of puppy? My Thanksgiving was good. Glad to have a break.
T: Belgium Shepherd
T: Do you have any questions or concerns about the essay before we start?
S: I had a German Shepherd when I was little.

After I told the student what kind of puppy I got, I wanted to move on and talk about the student's essay. But just as I entered my message asking if the student had any concerns before we began, she posted a message about her German Shepherd.

At first this kind of constant overlap, which happened in nearly all of the chat room sessions, was extremely frustrating. After all, on the screen it looks as though I'd ignored the student's question and decided we needed to move on to the next paragraph. Here's an example where the results of this overlap gave an even more unintended signal to the student:

S: so I could talk about where he commends them but still pointing out there mistakes
S: that's bad english
T: yep

In this case my intention was to agree with the student's first statement, but the student sent the message "that's bad english" just before I sent the message "yep." On the screen it appears as though I'm agreeing with the student that it was bad English. This was especially upsetting because I usually had to work hard to convince students that they didn't have to worry about grammar and punctuation in their chat room messages.

Although these misunderstandings were frustrating at first, soon I got used to this overlapping conversation style, and I learned to be flexible about moving back and forth. I also learned to constantly signal to the student when we overlapped and I needed to move backwards, or when the overlap caused a misunderstanding of the kind in my previous example.

Another feature of chat room conversation that tutors need to be aware of is how easy it is for the tutor to dominate the conversation—or at least appear on the screen to dominate the conversation. When I began chat room tutoring,

I found that I was typing out responses that were so long they were overwhelming to students. Here's an example:

T: I like the strategy of starting with a quote, but since the quote was pretty long and complex, I just got a little bit lost in it . . . especially since it's the "lead-in" of the essay—the very first thing I read. Plus it starts the essay off with a lot of someone else's voice, and not your voice. You could maybe quote some of it and paraphrase some of it, or think about using the quote somewhere in the intro but beginning the essay with a different lead-in . . . maybe something from the end of the introduction when you mention your personal experience with the topic? Just a suggestion.

On the computer screen it looks as though I've completely taken over and filled up the chat room message area, giving the student the sense that I was now wrestling control of the conference and the paper. In their essay describing the development of online tutoring at Michigan State University, Sharon Thomas, Danielle DeVoss, and Mark Hara say they rejected chat room tutoring in part because "its restrictive one-speaker-at-a-time modality elicited long-winded, 'teacherly' responses . . . that resulted in one-sided conversations" (76). I understand why the Michigan State tutors were frustrated with this aspect of chat room tutoring, but I wanted to find techniques to change this conversation style before rejecting chat room tutoring.

It didn't take me long to realize that the first step in dealing with this problem was to borrow from the conventions of social chat rooms and use ellipses as I typed in order to get my messages to the students faster. By typing responses in brief phrases and using ellipses to signal to students that more response was coming, my messages were easier to read and students didn't have to wonder what was taking so long to get a response. Here's an example of how I would have typed that long response using this technique:

T: I like the strategy of starting with a quote . . .
T: but since the quote was pretty long and complex . . .
T: I just got a little bit lost in it . . .
T: especially since it's the "lead-in" of the essay—the very first thing I read . . .
T: plus it starts the essay off with a lot of someone else's voice . . . and not your voice . . .
T: you could maybe quote some of it and paraphrase some of it . . .
T: or think about using the quote somewhere in the intro . . .
T: but beginning the essay with a different lead-in . . .
T: maybe something from the end of the introduction . . .
T: when you mention your personal experience with the topic?
T: just a suggestion

Formatting the response this way would have been more effective than just typing it as one big message, but I think this style of response is still flawed. Constantly seeing this many "T's" in a row on my computer screen, chat room conference after chat room conference, revealed to me that I'm not as student-centered as I thought I was. The problem was not so much with the technology, but with the way I was using the technology. I began asking more questions during chat room conferences, and I made sure there was a balance of "T's" and "S's" on my computer screen.

Here's an example from my second year of chat room tutoring—a conference with a student who's writing about frisbee golf on campus—and it shows the kind of balance in the conversation I was eventually able to achieve:

T: I like the topic, and I like the examples you give . . .
T: have you ever seen someone get hit, or seen the golfers get mad at someone?
S: it's kind of funny . . . cuz i went to leave this afternoon and one of my friends was coming in . . . first thing she said was watch out the frisbee guys are out
S: and my friend matt has been hit like twice
T: I wonder if you should talk a little about that stuff to add to your examples?
S: I see what you're saying. That sounds good.

As this example illustrates, the more tutoring I did in the chat room, the more conscious I became of the need to ask questions and make sure that both the tutor and the students were doing a lot of "talking" during a conference.

Chat room conventions

Just as chat rooms have their own style of conversation, they have their own conventions. A convention that chat room conferences share with f2f conferences is that the conversation between tutor and student doesn't need to be grammatically "correct." When students use chat rooms for social purposes, they know that grammatical correctness is not expected, and for the most part, they carried this convention over into the OWL chat room. In the examples I've given, students use abbreviations ("hw" for homework and "u" for you), they leave out punctuation and don't capitalize ("ok good thanks dan"), and they use wrong word forms ("your" to mean "you are"). It would have been schoolmarmish indeed for me to correct students when the goal of chat rooms is to mirror f2f conversation.

Despite the fact that informal language and use of abbreviations are part of chat room convention, the rhetorical situation of an OWL chat room was

sometimes seen by my students as quite different than the rhetorical situation of a social chat room. Some students felt that even though they were in a chat room, they were speaking to an English teacher and they'd better not make mistakes. Some students took an extremely long time to post messages, and in most of these cases it was because they were editing each response and question. After one especially long pause, I asked a student if he was still there. When he finally posted again, he told me he was looking up the meaning of a word in the dictionary so he would use it correctly in his chat room message. Whenever I tutored a student who was apologizing for her grammar errors or taking the time to carefully edit each "instant" message, I reminded the student that no one expects correct grammar in a chat room.

In "Responding to Writing On-line," Gail Hawisher and Charles Moran argue that "teachers and students together will have to agree on conventions" in an online writing environment (121). Whether it's overlapping conversation style or the informal nature of chat rooms, synchronous tutors need to be aware that the conventions of f2f tutoring don't necessarily apply to chat room tutoring. Although I've focused a great deal on differences between f2f and chat room tutoring, and I think tutors should be aware of these differences, I'll end my discussion by thinking more about what features chat room tutoring shares with f2f tutoring.

After reflecting on two years of synchronous OWL tutoring, I've come to realize that chat room tutoring has as much in common with f2f tutoring as it has differences. The chat room was not the cold, unfriendly place I expected it to be when I began tutoring online. Although it was certainly more difficult to get to know students personally and to establish a friendly rapport in the chat room than at the brick and mortar Writing Center, my sense of humor did come across online, and I was able to make small talk with repeat visitors. And despite differences in conversation styles and conventions, once I adjusted to the form and format of the chat room, I found it was nearly as easy and comfortable to converse with students online as it is f2f. In both chat room and f2f tutoring, my main concern was helping students become better writers by encouraging them to think for themselves, and not wrestling control of the conference and the students' essays. I do think that chat room tutoring is not for every student, just as it isn't for every tutor, but I think I've used what I've learned from my critical look at the chat room transcripts to improve my use of technology and improve my f2f tutoring. I hope my discussion will also be of use to other OWL consultants who are moving from f2f to online tutoring.

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TUTORS' COLUMN

A matter of style

You have probably been in this situation before: a student comes in with a piece of writing that keeps all of the rules. She knows how to generate ideas, write a thesis, organize, punctuate, spell; the paper has more focus than most professional photographers, more flow than a volcano, and, as an added perk, you understand exactly what she is trying to say. The only problem is that you have to force yourself to read it.

What do you tell the tutee? "I'm sorry but while I was reading your paper, the image of Rip Van Winkle appeared in my head," or maybe, "Can I have a copy of this paper, I think it would do wonders for my insomnia"? Falling asleep right there in the writing lab is not an option, and ignoring the problem to focus on a lesser issue would be cheating the client. What do you do?

Style is difficult to tutor. While grammar, punctuation, spelling, and many other writing skills can be learned from a rulebook, style has few rules and is, fortunately, not standardized. That does not, however, mean that tutors of style are in a hopeless situation. A tutor can help the student to 1), discover his or her own voice; 2) eliminate wordiness, and 3) build the confidence necessary to write without apology. By following these three steps a tutor can help the client turn an otherwise boring paper into one that the instructor is excited to read.

The most important thing a student can do to create reader interest is to write with a clear and interesting voice. Peter Elbow put it this way, "Consistent, trustworthy, and solid writing—not dull writing, however—comes only when the writer has found his own voice and is thus writing sincerely" (594).

A writer can have many voices, and the voice used is determined, chiefly, by the type of writing. For most college essays "the appropriate voice should be direct, clear, and unrestrained—it should be the student's own voice, the kind found in a personal diary" (McCuen and Winkler 46). Having students read a section of their paper out loud is a good way to check if they are comfortable with the voice they have chosen. If they are not, a tutor can ask the tutee open-ended questions about their topic, write down a few of the responses verbatim, and help the student look at his or her natural voice to get ideas.

It is also important that the chosen voice is one of academia. Eliminating slang within a paper can be a challenging task, tutees may see slang as an essential part of their voice, but it is necessary to draw the line between the academic and spoken languages. Word validity can be tested very easily by looking words up in a standard dictionary. Most slang words, if they appear at all, will not be defined in slang terms. This method gives you, the tutor, credibility while helping the students find a voice that caters to both the entertainment side of writing, and the academic.

The second step to helping a student lighten a dim paper is to eliminate wordiness. Sometimes students feel that quantity equals quality; the results of this attitude can be disastrous. For example the thesis of a paper about the evils of fast driving could read:

Fast driving is dangerous.

Or, if the student is more interested in impressing the teacher with the sheer mass of her paper, hoping that lifting it causes him to keel over in pain and give it an automatic A because reading it would take weeks, the thesis could read:

> In my humble opinion, though I do not claim to be an expert on this complicated subject, fast driving, in most circumstances, would seem to be rather dangerous, in many respects, or at least so it would seem to me. (Roberts 3)

Of course, if your client has gone this far, then you have even bigger problems. Sometimes wordiness can hide empty content, or questionable research. But, other times students write this way because they don't understand the purpose of the essay. Students trained from early on that the point of an assignment is to write five hundred words, or three to five pages (three is good, four is better, five is best) have a hard time when they are suddenly judged on their paper's content, not their paper's ability to cover a continent. Explaining to the student that redundancy, pat expressions, and added adjectives add nothing to a paper but extra paper is sometimes needed in order to ensure their growth as a writer.

One exercise to help eliminate wordiness is to go through a segment of the paper one phrase at a time, helping the student decide what is necessary and what is not. Focus on one

paragraph, and see that every sentence is fresh and thesis related. Another valuable exercise would be to have the tutee make an outline of the paper, writing out the bare bones. Then, together, go through the paper and make sure that everything fits into the outline. Eliminating wordiness eases boredom by giving way to the interesting, important ideas within the paper. It also makes room for content, keeping the reader interested, instead of asleep.

Lastly, in order to write an interesting paper, a student needs to feel free to do so. Jeannie Griffith wrote of a client who came into the tutoring lab terrified of writing. She feared that she would not be able to uncover her teacher's hidden rules and agendas, and would fail the assignment. Anxiety over writing (and other) assignments is a common thing. Many students walk a thin line with their papers and are continually afraid of breaking the rules. Griffith's tutee explains the basis of her fears by explaining, "One teacher would say that you can't use the word 'nice' and then the next would say not to use the word 'I.' Then another would say that 'nice' is all right, but not to start a sentence with 'and' or 'because'" (11). These types of rules, layered upon each other by a dozen years of English instruction create a paranoia about individual writing that can produce the type of perfect, stagnant writing we are trying to help our clients avoid.

There are several things that a tutor can do to help a tutee overcome his or her fears. One of the best ways is to compliment the student. Harvey Venia, peer tutor, explains, "most of the students that you tutor have already convinced themselves that they are bad writers" (9). Complimenting the student on the strong points of their paper, which in this situation are many, will help them feel capable and confident. It will help them find the courage to explore their voice, and break out of the traditional mold they have forced themselves into by playing it safe.

Another way to help the student gain confidence is to empower them with knowledge of the assignment and the best way to fulfill it. You have tutored unclear assignments before, and if you didn't understand them, neither did your tutee. A tutor's worst nightmare is when, "the students who received lower grades approach you and ask you why you didn't tell them they needed to document" (Kinkead 5). Helping students understand the assignment not only keeps you from having nightmares, but also helps them become better writers.

Fear of not accurately completing the assignment is an easy fear to eliminate. When dealing with these fears a simple explanation of the assignment will help. And, if you know the teacher assigning it, asking them what they look for, or going over previous essays which received high marks can help you help the student.

Just like understanding the assignment will empower your tutee, understanding these three steps will empower you, the tutor, and help you deal with issues of style. So next time, instead of yawning repeatedly while reading and hoping that your student gets the hint, you can help them. And, by making a students paper more interesting and readable, you will also ultimately, help them become a better writer.

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October 19-23, 2005: International Writing Centers Association, in Minneapolis, MN.
Contact: Frankie Condon e-mail: fvcondon@stcloudstate.edu. Conference Web site: <http://writingcenters.org/2005/index.html>.

February 16-18, 2006: Southeastern Writing Centers Association, in Chapel Hill, NC
Contact: Kim Abels kabels@email.unc.edu and Vicki Russell vgr@duke.edu. Conference Web site: <http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio/swca/>.

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