THE WRITING LAB

NEWSLETTER

– FROM THE EDITOR –

Welcome to the "new, all new" *Writing Lab Newsletter,* where much has happened. It's taken a year to to work with designers on the new format and to confront mind-boggling difficulties as I coped with learning the new software to use in putting each issue together. All of you who have been jolted out of comfortable and simple software programs as you move on to new, sophisticated (and daunting!) ones have also experienced this feeling of utter confusion. But we survive—somehow. Writing center people are always ready for new challenges, right?

We hope the new look pleases you, and given the fondness for the old familiar "W" in our logo, it remains. Please, let us hear from you, including suggestions as to other changes you'd like. Also, almost completed is our archive of past volumes, in word-searchable format: <owl.english.purdue.edu/wln>.

And we have a new Managing Editor, Wendy Madore, who is at the same old e-mail address (wln@purdue.edu) and phone number (765-494-7268). Wendy looks forward to meeting you and handling your subscription matters. With postal rates going up almost as fast as printing costs, please remember that after many years, we have raised subscription rates, but hoping to keep the cost to your ever-strained budgets as minimal as possible.

✦ *Muriel Harris, editor*

𝓘NSIDE

REWRITING RACE IN THE WRITING CENTER

✦ *Bethany Davila*
DePaul University

What passes for "good academic writing" is socially and culturally constructed by scholars who are both narrow in their vision and exclusionary about their club. And the terms of membership in this club are, of course, those of acculturation; to join, one must discard perfectly reasonable ways of thinking and communication and, in the process, learn to disparage those ways, and pity those who cling to them.

– Helen Fox

As a graduate student, I am working hard to break into the discourse of writing center and composition studies theory and pedagogy. This requires that I learn a specialized language, read and write in an academic voice, and in general, assimilate myself within the fields. Additionally, I am working as a tutor in a midwestern university's writing center, and I ask for the same willingness to assimilate from the students who visit. To help them succeed within the university (which at a minimum means achieving passing grades), I aim to guide them towards becoming better academic writers who can create effective, well-organized arguments that include thesis

statements, avoid the passive voice, and adhere to countless other rules. For some students (myself included), the move toward assimilation is like driving on a newly paved highway on a Sunday afternoon. For others, it is a process more similar to sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic in a construction zone during rush hour. The difference between the two groups of students, in part, is related to the distance between their primary discourse and the discourses of the academy; a distance that can be tied to race, income, class, and other social and political indicators.

As many educators and experts in the field have argued, non-mainstream students need to acquire dominant discourses in order to compete within the current system of power and privilege (Fox, Courts, Delpit, Bizzell). At many colleges and universities, writing centers function as sites to help these students assimilate, with the aforementioned goal in mind. However, when writing centers fail to acknowledge or question the power structure within which they operate, they perpetuate a loyalty to the current system of domination, which can work to eliminate diversity and difference (Bawarshi and Pelkowski, Grimm, Vandenberg). Students of color, in particular, suffer from this uncritical validation of academic discourses (Barron and Grimm).

RACING TOWARD A SOLUTION

With such a large gap between academic discourses and the discourses of many students of color, it is not enough for writing centers to operate as sites of assimilation where students learn how to change themselves to better fit the mold of academia. Instead, writing centers need to be aware of the values and ideology inherent in academic discourses and to rewrite the writing center as a place where students of all races are able to negotiate the difference between their discourses and those of the academy. As such, it is crucial for writing centers to offer a space where differences can be acknowledged, welcomed, and accommodated—or as Gloria Anzaldua has it, a borderland.

When I tutor students who do not speak (or write) English as a first language, the tutorial sessions almost always include discussions about the student's primary language. These conversations help me to better understand students' writing and acknowledge their ability and skill in their primary languages. Why then, isn't it as common or easy to have similar conversations with students of color who operate outside of standard edited English because of dialects as opposed to languages? Perhaps it is a symptom of our society's continual avoidance of the topic of race, or perhaps it is white guilt (for those of us who are white). Whatever the reason, we owe it to the students to move past our own anxieties and to provide students with awareness and understanding of how race and writing intersect.

The first step in this process is to initiate several conversations: conversations among writing center professionals, among writing center tutors, between these two groups, and ultimately, between tutors and tutees. Furthermore, to transform writing centers into sites of negotiation and change, we may need to differentiate the assumptions and practices of the center from those of the college. By critically evaluating the relationship between race and writing and the position of each within the academy and society, writing centers (including the directors and the tutors) can enact a critical consciousness of the values and assumptions of standard edited English and academic discourses and acknowledge the role of writing in maintaining the status quo (where white, middle-class students are privileged at the expense of all others). Ideally, this critical consciousness will better prepare tutors to address race within the tutorial by guiding tutees in exploring the conflict between their primary discourses and those of the academy and to recognize that no one discourse is naturally better than another.

Furthermore, tutors must caution students that when acquiring a new dominant discourse (or discourses), they will also be expected to accept the values inherent within these discourses—most

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing.

likely values of white, middle-class Americans. Discourse acquisition, then, can change students' perceptions of their primary discourse systems, obscuring the bread-crumb trail that leads back to "the way things were." However, by providing an opportunity for students of color to begin thinking and talking about the contention between their primary discourses and those of the academy, writing centers can offer an inroad to a critical negotiation of these conflicts.

POTENTIAL ROADBLOCKS

The difficulties in initiating this transformation can, at first glance, be overwhelming. Rewriting the writing center calls for adjustments in tutor training programs, confronting the time limitations within the tutoring session, and finally (and perhaps most importantly) building trust. Despite these limitations, creating a writing center that better meets the needs of all students is possible.

TUTOR TRAINING

To begin with, even if directors are committed to a vision of writing centers as a borderland, it is often the student tutors who are responsible for enacting and representing this position, and their willingness or ability to do so depends largely on their understanding of and commitment to the director's vision. Even in the best of circumstances, where tutors receive training in the form of a credit-bearing course, given the myriad issues entwined in writing center theory, tutors are often not prepared to address the relationship between race and writing in a tutorial. Moreover, orientation training programs, which are more common, may not be able to address the issue at all. Without the proper training, tutors will not be qualified to discuss the role of race in writing and risk offending students or representing a negative image of the writing center if they approach the topic unprepared—especially in the potentially charged dynamic of white tutor and a student of color. Furthermore, even when prepared, white tutors may be hesitant to talk about race with students-of-color.

To address these issues, writing center directors should initiate conversations about race (including whiteness) and writing at the onset of tutor training, thereby making this topic a priority. Through these discussions, directors can encourage tutors to be critically aware of and challenge their participation in perpetuating the writing center as a site for assimilation. Regardless of the length of tutor training programs, writing center listservs offer an inexpensive forum for tutors to negotiate their way through theory about race and rhetoric into addressing the topic in a tutorial. This setting would allow experienced tutors to provide informal case studies of sessions that address race and all tutors could discuss their confusion or anxiety regarding this topic.

TUTORING SESSIONS

In addition to tutor training, the time constraints of the tutorial session present another challenge. It is often a struggle to fully address aspects of a student's writing, let alone the relationship between identity and writing, within one session. The first, and perhaps most obvious, solution would be to encourage regular appointments with the same student, which would offer tutors an opportunity to not only address underlying issues in a student's writing, but also build trust. However, convincing students to make a weekly commitment to their writing is not a simple feat. Perhaps when tutors are discussing the goals for the session with tutees, they can also discuss what they will not be able to cover given the time constraints, including the interaction of race (and other social categories) and writing, and they can then suggest additional appointments. Regardless, reminding students that academic discourse is simply one option—albeit an option that is given preference and privilege by those within the academy and the dominant culture in general—may help them begin to view writing as a social construct and lift the mask of ideology from some of the discourse conventions.

BUILDING TRUST

It seems optimistic (at best) to assume tutors will be able to build trust between themselves and tutees—especially tutees of color who distrust the institution at large—within one session. Without a foundation of proper training and trust, it becomes more difficult and potentially less appropriate for tutors, especially white tutors, to address this highly sensitive issue with a tutee. Complicating the issue for many students of color is a deep-rooted distrust of the academy, resulting from the extended time frame in which marginalized students have been denied access to academia. John Ogbu links this chronic distrust, specifically for African Americans, to historical evidence that academic achievements do not equate with economic success for blacks and to the belief that academic success is directly tied to acting white and the loss of identity (235, 238). Although Ogbu focuses only on African Americans because of their status as "castelike minorities" (meaning they are involuntary immigrants), I would argue that his analysis can, in part, be applied to other minority groups who struggle economically despite their levels of education.

Because distrust exists on an institutional level, so too must the solution. Writing centers should rewrite themselves as allies for students of color—once this is accomplished and writing centers are trusted, the struggle to build trust in one session will become less important. Furthermore, if students of color see the writing center as a place where they can critically negotiate the difference between their primary discourses and those of the academy, they may be more willing to discuss the effect of race on their writing (assuming it is necessary and appropriate). Writing centers also should attempt to employ a racially diverse staff of tutors—again, this would help position the center as an ally. Finally, writing centers can become liaisons between faculty and students, discussing the issue of race and writing with faculty from multiple disciplines to find acceptable ways to push the edges of dominant discourses from the inside. Connected to the issue of trust is that of carefully listening to students during the tutoring sessions. We must be prepared for the real possibility that students may not want to discuss race at the writing center. In this case, tutors should respect the students' wishes. However, we can both meet the needs of the students and approach the topic (when appropriate) if we are patient, tactful, and not afraid to talk about race. In accordance with the goals of enacting a critical consciousness and a productive borderland, tutors should alert tutees to the possible connection between race and writing. Beyond this, we must honor the students' wishes.

FIGHTING TRAFFIC

As a new tutor, I am still working to find strategies for dealing with the many complex situations that can arise during tutorials. However, when it comes to race in the writing center, I am of the mindset that if we are not actively working towards a solution, then we are part of the problem. I am aware that the suggestions I have outlined above are not simple and cannot be enacted overnight. Furthermore, my suggestions are merely a first step towards recognizing, addressing, and erasing the biases that exists within universities and writing centers. Therefore, in order to affect change, we must be fully committed and must remind ourselves and those around us to be continually critically aware of our personal roles and the role of the writing center in either perpetuating the privilege associating with academic discourse or challenging the system.

As individuals committed to the view of writing centers as sites where all students can come to negotiate their place within the academy, we should pay special attention to the students who are stuck between two discourses, fighting their way through the traffic. And, when possible, we should not only keep them company, but also help them find an alternative route to reach their goals. However, we also must make sure these students understand that once they arrive at their destination, they may not be able to go back. ◆

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NEWS

CORRECTION

When an article by Moira Ozias and Brian Fallon appeared in the May issue of *WLN*, they noticed a mistake. Although they referenced Beth Boquet's *Noise from the Writing Centers* in both the title and at other points in the text, the accompanying footnote didn't make it into the publication. We regret the error and are glad that Moria Ozias and Brian Fallon called this to our attention.

CALL FOR PARTICIPATION: THE WRITING CENTERS RESEARCH PROJECT SURVEY FOR AY 2005-2006.

Beginning September 1, 2006, the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) will conduct its fourth biennial survey to collect benchmark data on writing centers. The WCRP requests that all writing center directors visit its web site, www.wcrp.louisville.edu , and either complete the survey online or download a printable version to complete by hand. Participants may also request a hard copy of the survey.

Questions about the survey or requests for hard copies should be directed to Stephen Neaderhiser, senead01@louisville.edu or The Writing Centers Research Project, 312 Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292. Please complete the survey by Friday, October 20, 2006.

*A*NNOUNCEMENTS

Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association and Philadelphia Council of Writing Program Administrators

March 30-31, 2007
Radnor, PA
"'Growing More Attentive to the Manner of Writing': Looking at the Writing Center through the Spectacles of Franklin"

Conference Web site: <http://www2.mcdaniel.edu/mawca>. Chair: John Nordlof, Eastern University, St. Davids, PA

WRITING CENTER ADMINISTRATION: NOTES OF A ROTATING HEAD

✦*Ron Scheer*
University of Southern California

For some readers, the concept of a rotating head brings to mind a scene from *The Exorcist,* in which a girl is possessed by the Devil and given to even more bizarre behavior than the average teenager. As an analogue, the academic practice of taking turns as head of a department can have its own unexpected outcomes, although the rotating department head is not typically known for them. Assuming leadership of one's peers for a while provides appreciation for that role and involves a degree of knowledge transfer about how things get done in an institution of higher learning. All of which may be why putting a rotating head in charge of a writing center looks like a commendable idea. Under ideal conditions, it no doubt is. However, to ensure that conditions are indeed ideal, the position would have to meet all of the following criteria:

- The person who holds the position is on a tenure track;
- That person is a rhet/comp or writing center professional;
- The position rotates among a team of 2-3 like-minded and dedicated individuals;
- The writing center director reports to a department head or dean who is a strong writing center advocate; and
- The director is supported by a full-time assistant who can provide operational continuity.

Failing to meet any one of these criteria, a rotating head is poorly suited to the job and unlikely to succeed.

TENURE TRACK

An effective writing center director needs to be someone with some authority and credibility in the institution. The low-level position of the writing center in many places means it needs all the influence it can get for a fair share of budget, space, and other resources. Nontenure-track faculty are so far down the pecking order in a typical university that they are easily (and shamefully) ignored.

More to the point, nontenure-track faculty also are by nature temporary. Their career objective is likely to be a tenure-track position, and it's reasonable to expect them to be actively seeking one, most probably elsewhere. When the institution is not making a long-term commitment to them, or offering even the opportunity, they have little incentive to understand and address the long-term objectives of the institution or the writing center's most complex and pressing problems.

At my university, for instance, the writing center serves a large number of second language writers on a campus that has one of the largest populations of international students in the U.S. Building ESL proficiency into the Writing Center staff, and developing services responsive to the needs of these students require considerable effort and setting goals that can't be realized in one or two years. Long-term solutions like this are not consistent with the long-term objectives of nontenure-track instructors, whose intention, understandably, is to keep their bags packed and ready by the door.

In my experience, the brightest and best of nontenure-track writing program faculty leave soonest. A rotating writing center head merely makes a matter of policy what is already a matter of practice – the position itself is a revolving door. More insidiously, if you know you are leaving, there is little incentive to feel any accountability for actions taken or not taken. You will not be around to answer for a failure to address a problem. Anyone who has inherited a mess from the previous incumbent of an administrative position will need no illustrations of how thoroughly even basic responsibilities can be neglected by a now-absent predecessor. Desired initiatives for instance can take a back seat for months while basic day-to-day operations are made to function normally again.

Finally, there is the special case of the writing center that is affiliated with a department with no tenure-track faculty at all, for example a writing program that does not offer a major and functions only as a service department. In this case, the writing center director lacks association with even an academic faculty to acquire leverage or visibility among the institution's decision makers. Ignoring the appeals and best arguments of such a writing center carries no penalties.

RHET/COMP PROFESSIONALS.

An effective writing center director needs to be someone who

- Keeps current with at least that part of the literature most relevant to their own role;
- Participates actively in the discourse (wcenter, publications, conferences); and
- Generates the kind of success on the job that only commitment and informed leadership provide.

The short-term rotating head whose career and reputation depend on research and publications in another area of interest is going to be unprepared to direct a writing center, except in the most superficial and perfunctory way.

Unaware of best practices, writing center theory, and professional resources, such a director will be a stranger in a strange land, expecting outcomes that are counterproductive if not wrong-headed. Meanwhile, there will be little incentive to ascend what is at this point in history a sharply rising learning curve, taking the time to read and absorb the seminal texts, the back issues of *WLN* and *WCJ*, or even the daily flood of posts on WCenter.

WRITING CENTER DIRECTOR TEAM

A paramount requirement of writing center management is to provide continuity and consistency from one year to the next—continuity of vision and purpose, consistency of leadership and philosophy. Where the director's position rotates among faculty members, these requirements can be deeply compromised. On the other hand, a team of two or three like-minded individuals can mitigate the drawbacks.

While they remain "in the loop" during their off years, they can assume responsibilities with a knowledge of the long-term objectives, as well as the agreed strategies and tactics for achieving them. Such a team can also seize the opportunity for joint research, drawing on a shared experience and a shared commitment. Put another way, two or three heads are better than one. Unlike committees, which are not well known for decisive action, innovation, or follow-through, a team dedicated to a particular initiative can be much more effective because each member has a professional interest in thinking out of the box and getting things done.

STRONG WRITING CENTER ADVOCATE

This is a requirement for any kind of writing center director, but it's especially critical for the rotating head, who lacks the authority that comes with length of service, knowledge of the job, and seasoned experience. Rotating heads need someone looking out for them and offering advice, if not actually mentoring them in effective management. Zen enthusiasts will applaud the happy innovativeness of the beginner's mind, but the academy has little forgiveness for the inevitable mistakes that come with inexperience, and having blundered, the short-termer has little time to undo the damage.

Ideally, this advocate can support a writing center director's efforts across the institution, not just within a single department. A dean, in possession of the big picture, can help more than the department head, whose perspective may be limited. Also, this advocate needs to actually understand writing center work. An advocate will understand, for instance, that once they are set up, writing centers do not run themselves. Just in the area of quality control, a director is responsible for

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- Recruitment and on-the-job training of reliable, skilled staff
- Ongoing assessment of consultants' performance
- Improvement of faculty communications and responsiveness to faculty requests
- Responsiveness to shifts in student populations
- Outreach to other service departments and new faculty
- Effectively incorporating new technologies
- Maintaining professional standards
- Partnering with other writing-related campus initiatives
- Continuing improvement of writing center materials and services

An advocate will understand all this, respect the director's professional judgment, and grant enough independence to exercise it. This is expecting a lot. The rotating head needs every bit of it.

As backup, a rotating head can also benefit from the active support of a strong faculty advisory board. A group of tenured faculty members who value writing as a key component of student-centered learning can do much to provide credibility, leverage, and continuity. They can represent the interests of the writing center in faculty governance and cross-disciplinary committees. More important, they can speak for the writing center when the administration is making decision affecting its resources.

SUPPORT FROM AN ASSISTANT

Running a writing center can easily be a full-time job. A faculty member is unlikely to get as much as one-half release time. The center obviously needs someone, an assistant, who can provide day-to-day operational continuity. This person handles scheduling and traffic, acts as an office manager, monitors the tutorial staff, expedites processing of new hires and submission of time sheets, and on and on.

For the rotating head, an even more crucial responsibility is providing continuity from one incumbent to the next. At my institution, where I was the fifth writing center director in six years, the Program Assistant had clearly kept the Center going, preserving not just the policies and procedures, but the culture and the lore that represented our quality of service, our commitment, and our philosophy. In my first weeks and months there, he also taught me most of what I needed to know to do my job, including the kind of judgment needed to hire consultants who would be dependable, professional, and congenial with the students who come to us. When I had new ideas, I ran them by him, because I knew he could instantly determine both the immediate impact and the predictable ripple effects. Simply put, I would have been lost without him. And so will the next rotating head, if my assistant moves on.

FADE TO BLACK

Without all these factors in place, the mission and purpose of the writing center are compromised by the rotating head. At best it can carry on year after year, all the time falling behind as the profession continues to move forward, and eventually failing to meet the needs of a changing institution, a changing student population, new technologies, and a changing curriculum.

How, for instance, does a writing center respond to the online environment, where tutors review student writing by e-mail and chat? It's being done elsewhere, but it's not likely to happen any time soon where the writing center has changed little in the last decade. How does a writing center respond to the increasing use of visual rhetoric in production of multimedia materials? Writing centers are beginning to consider that one, but chiefly where a seasoned, dedicated director has had the time and experience to take it on as a challenge. And what about those international students looking to the writing center for help? They may find themselves on hold, as well. Why? The incoming rotating head has his or her hands full for the first twelve months just learning the job. And that year will have been lost.

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing.

 A year—let me back up and unpack those two words. When I learned that the Writing Center position I held was to be converted into a two-year-maximum rotating head—that I myself had become a rotating head—I felt the Writing Center's future fade to black.

The plans I had for outreach and promoting the Center (based on two marketing studies by a colleague's current business communications class), the plans for introducing conversation groups for international students, the plans for proofreading workshops, the plans for overhauling our existing workshop materials and handouts and orientation for new hires, all the plans for improving the Writing Center and the plans for research dissolved like a mirage. Put another way, the Writing Center had been robbed of the future I had envisioned for it.

Yes, the Web site I created will probably live after me, and the new scheduling software I got approval for might eventually be implemented and put to use. The redesign of promotional materials (like the quick and dirty flyer, "Write On!" for last summer's freshman orientations) might continue in print.

But after learning the job myself in the first year (I can now confidently recruit and hire new tutors, for example), getting current with the literature, stirring up enough interest to get release time for a second-language expert in another agency on campus to help out at the Writing Center, getting involved with the local chapter of the IWCA, and making the aforementioned plans, the real accomplishments still lay ahead – in that third year. Instead, it will be someone else's turn to start over at square one.

WORST CASE

Based on my experience, I conclude the rotating head is a guarantee of entropy. It keeps the writing center in a perpetual state of business as usual. There are plenty of reasons why this is not good, and worst-case scenarios suggest themselves. Here's one of them. Where the writing center director is appointed by and reports to the head of a writing program that functions as a service department (no major, no tenure-track faculty, the department head a staff position, allowing its incumbent to serve in office indefinitely), a rotating head is at a particular disadvantage. Led by an appointee of the writing program, the writing center is limited by the priorities of the program's director.

Writing program directors, for instance, who do not teach and do not research or publish as scholars cannot keep up with the field, and they perpetuate a limited and increasingly outdated pedagogy. Without a continually refreshed professional perspective, they lack the leadership that makes a strong, dedicated, and effective writing faculty. While writing center work continues to evolve as an independent field, their understanding of its role and function remains uninformed, unchanged, and —like the writing program—frozen in time. In such circumstances the rotating head appointed to direct the writing center will likely be someone who won't challenge the status quo with new ideas or a different set of priorities. If by chance that happens, they can be quickly replaced with another appointee. Nothing changes, and there are losers all around.

A big loser is the writing program itself. The writing center is in a position to provide invaluable feedback on how effectively writing is being taught. Consultants see how students struggle with poorly conceived, vague, and confusing essay assignments. And more painfully, they see the assignments grounded so inescapably in American culture (politics, gender, race, entertainment, advertising) that they utterly mystify international students. Consultants see the fallout from ill-considered comments made on papers by instructors, questionable grading, and bitter conflicts of differing student-teacher values. The writing program that brooks no criticism will not welcome the evidence of its actual performance—which walks daily through the door of the writing center—and thus it misses opportunities to improve itself.

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BACK TO THE FUTURE

So is a rotating head ever a good idea? Yes, it can be, under the right conditions, as already spelled out here. Otherwise, definitely not. The most damaging impact is the loss of continuity, and with that the near impossibility of growth and responsiveness to new challenges.

Meanwhile, one hopes that the writing center will hold, representing a place of learning on campus whose mission is to help students discover writing *as* learning, and in this role serve the mission of the entire university. In its informality, the absence of grading, and any number of other factors peculiar to writing centers, it does the job often more effectively than the writing program and its instructors—no matter how dedicated they almost invariably are.

The ah-ha! light bulbs flashing on in writing center conferences find expression in the comments recorded by students on exit surveys, and reading those continues to illuminate my days. The two years I will have spent in the Writing Center, despite their brevity, will remain the two most rewarding years I have spent in the academy. When I look at it that way, becoming a rotating head has in no way been a plot turn in a horror movie. It's only when I think of what might have been that I lament the absence of a happy ending. ✦

MISSION IMPROVABLE—FURTHER THOUGHTS ON CONSULTANT EDUCATION

✦ *Mike Mattison*
Boise State University

In *Noise from the Writing Center,* Elizabeth Boquet critiques a "model of staff education that sets up a content model for tutoring, a low-risk/low-yield approach to staff education" (77). Such a model can help consultants "produce a competent session that proceeds along a fairly typical trajectory," and though she understands why such a model is valued, Boquet claims that it "downplays the amount of risk involved in doing this work as well as the kinds of risks one might need to take in order to find the work meaningful, fulfilling, even pleasurable" (78).

Boquet's answer, of course, is to plug in a little Jimi Hendrix and play with the idea of improvisation during staff education. She notes, though, that improvisation is not about "anything goes." Instead, improvisation is "a skillful demonstration performed by someone who knows the tones of her instrument, the rhythms of her musical traditions, so well that she can both transgress and exceed them" (76). As an example of a consultant course *not* focused on the "content model," Boquet offers up Meg Carroll's summer sessions at Rhode Island College. These sessions utilize art projects, collaborative story-telling, and other such practices to prepare consultants. For one student, the sessions induced a "state of 'relaxed readiness, of constant tension and release, flexing and stretching" (103). That relaxed readiness should allow a consultant to move beyond the boundaries of a typical session, to explore with a writer other possibilities.

Reading Boquet's work reminds me of others, specifically Stephen Nachmanovitch's *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art.* Nachmanovitch, who also grounds much of his thinking in his musical experience, says that improvisation is "intuition in action" (41), and also warns that an emphasis on technique can limit our intuitive responses: "But the technique can get too solid—we can become so used to knowing how it should be done that we become distanced from the freshness

of today's situation. . . .Competence that loses a sense of its roots in the playful spirit becomes ensconced in rigid forms of professionalism" (67). This sounds very much like a "low-risk/low-yield" approach. Consultants who "know" how a session should go, or have worked with "this type of writer" before, can become stuck in a standard response.

So, how to un-stick? Again, Boquet suggests that Carroll has found one pathway to a "higher-risk/higher-yield model for tutoring" that encourages writing center staff to "operate on the edge of [their] expertise" (81). I want to suggest another: acting exercises. For the past two years, the consultants enrolled in the writing center course at Boise State University have experimented with theatrical improvisational exercises in order to help them prepare to work with a variety of writers, in a variety of situations, and the results have been promising.[a]

Before describing the exercises and their effect on the consultants (and me), I want to acknowledge some of the writing center textbooks that influenced my thinking. Yes, Boquet notes many of them have titles that "dictate the practicality of the job" and that their chapters focus on the "strategies" consultants can use when working with a writer (85). But, there is also Leigh Ryan's suggestion that consultants consider some various "scenarios" and "act out the different parts" (77). Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad promote role-playing in a training course (132), and Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner (2000) devote a chapter to "The Mock Tutorial" in the first edition of their text. There are glimmers of a stage here, prompts that I have drawn upon in my thinking about my own consulting course.[b]

But *how* to approach the scenarios or mock consultations or role playing? Not one of the texts mentioned above specifically encourages an open-ended approach to these activities, and none suggests preliminary acting exercises. Ryan provides the dialogue for her imagined scenes and says that they are "excellent material for group discussion" (77). McAndrew and Reigstad's role-playing is designed primarily to illustrate three types of consultation (student-centered, collaborative, teacher-oriented), and Lerner and Gillespie acknowledge that, in a mock tutorial with a trainee in both roles, "the person you tutor will be anxious to make the tutorial work" (69). Marvin Garrett does suggest some more involved role-playing, with each mock session focusing "on a particular kind of writing or attitude problem" (96), but there are few details beyond this general description.

Jane Bowman Smith offers a slight twist to working with consulting scenarios, in large part because her students were expecting her to provide answers: "[M]y interns . . . did not pause to think about the scenarios—they simply waited for me to lead class discussions about the assigned readings" (14). So she wrote up the scenarios on index cards and had her interns each select a card. The intern read off the scenario and offered an explanation of how she would handle the situation; the explanation was then discussed by the group. This approach to scenarios, for Bowman Smith, "results in a more complex understanding of the problem as the class members examine more features of messy reality of the tutorial scene" (14).

Aha, messy reality—what Boquet calls the "chaos" of our work (84). Now, to get even messier, even more chaotic, what if we push Bowman Smith's idea a little further? What if, instead of simply discussing the scenarios, consultants act them out? Not from pre-written dialogue, but from scratch? And, even before that, what if we provide some acting exercises that allow them to stretch and improvise and experiment in various situations? Those are the questions that led me to incorporate the improv exercises into the consulting course.

The exercises appear early on in the syllabus, in the second week of class. And yes, the one-word description, "Improv," has caused a few students to approach me and ask exactly what will happen

in class that day. What does happen, I believe, is a free-wheeling, risk-taking, community-building, expectation-dropping, laugh-inducing series of skits that prepare us as a group to role play in mock consultations and then move on to real consultations. It is a first step in the process of educating consultants to trust in themselves and their instincts and to take some risks in their consultation work. As one consultant, Gina, wrote, "Well, after today I think the answer to 'success' is in trusting that there isn't a 'right' answer. You just have to use the knowledge and creativity you have to find your best answer." Making that distinction between "right" and "best" is crucial for writing center work.

As for the exercises themselves, they are borrowed from several sources: Milton Polsky's *Let's Improvise,* Keith Johnstone's *Impro,* the Web site <www.learnimprov.com>, the television show "Whose Line is it Anyway?", and my own time in theatre courses as an undergraduate. We usually start with the "alphabet game," which involves two students. The others in the class shout out a location for the scene, a relationship between the two (mother-son, friend-friend), and a situation (shopping for clothes, climbing a mountain). Then, the two participants must play out the scene, but they must work through the alphabet as they do so—the first participant must begin her line with "A," the second with "B," and so on. We also vary the exercise by writing each letter of the alphabet on an index card and then shuffling the deck, making the participants work through their dialogue in whatever order the letters appear. Somehow we can always tell who has the "X."

Another exercise involves three consultants, who are told they are individual components of one giant brain and each of them can speak but one word at a time, in order to form a collective thought. They then take questions from the audience. It is fascinating (and funny) to watch as a trio attempts to construct a longer and longer sentence one word at a time. True collaboration. There is also the "Question Game," where two consultants face each other and attempt to hold a conversation that consists only of questions. If one consultant makes a statement, or cannot think of a question within a few seconds, she steps out and another takes her place. And (last example), we also have an exercise in which one consultant stands in front of the class while a picture is flashed on the screen behind him. He is not allowed to look at the picture, but must answer questions from the audience about it, and he must consider himself an expert on the topic. After several questions, we ask him to take a guess about the picture's content.[c]

As I have indicated, the exercises provoke a lot of laughter. There are chuckles and giggles and guffaws as we watch and participate (and yes, I do join in). But, I want to emphasize that the exercises are not an idle escape from the "work" of the course; they are not offered without pedagogical intent. For one thing, the improv exercises are a form of play, and Nachmanovitch argues that a "creature that plays is more readily adaptable to changing contexts and conditions" (45). The playfulness that consultants bring to the improv can be carried over to the mock consultations the following week, and then ideally into the consultations they will hold in the Writing Center. Being playful is not the same thing as lacking seriousness—consider Welch's (1999) call for play in our work, and Davis's (2000) idea of a "pedagogy of laughter" (213).[d]

To play is to take risks, and the consultants write that the improv exercises are risky, in many ways. For most, the primary fear is of looking foolish in front of an audience. As Laura wrote, "When I hear 'improv,' I automatically cringe and want to call in sick to wherever that word is associated with." The activity asks consultants to perform for others in a non-written medium, to work outside a comfort zone; it is tightrope walking they are doing, a challenging high-wire act.

Certainly I recognize that risk, and I try to alleviate it somewhat. Before we begin I make a show of closing our classroom door and announcing that the following is for us alone—the classroom becomes what Nachmanovitch would call our *tenemos,* "the play space." He says that the *tenemos*

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing.

in ancient Greece was a "magic circle, a delimited sacred space within which special rules apply and in which extraordinary events are free to occur" (75). To further prepare our space, I take around a small bag and ask the consultants to place all their fears, inhibitions, and insecurities inside. They are welcome, I say, to pick them up again after class, but I also volunteer to pitch the whole lot should they wish.

Yet the risk is also the reward, and it is when we jump fully into the possibilities that we gain from improvisation. As Boquet writes, the "most interesting improvisations work because they are always on the verge of dissonance. They are always just about to fail." But when they work, she says, they are "really really fun" and can leave us "wide-eyed" (76). Kim seems to have found that sense of fun: "My ego said I couldn't improvise, but I pushed it aside and just allowed my mind to be open and responsive. . . . Improvising is fun, especially now that I'm not afraid to make a fool of myself." Others talked too about gaining confidence and surprising themselves with what they were able to do when put on the spot (or stage).

 The improv exercises are, again, only a first step. In the course we look to take the spirit and playfulness from the exercises into the mock consultations. Rather than rely solely on a textbook for various consulting scenarios, I ask the students to come up with scenes. They each jot down a list of "what if" questions: What if a student has plagiarized? What if I know the writer? What if someone hits on me? What if I don't understand the topic? From this list I put together the outline of a few situations—we already have a setting (writing center) and a relationship (writer-consultant)—and then the students act them out.[e]

The idea, of course, is to mimic a real consultation, and to force consultants to work through the discussion on the fly. Yet I also hope to maintain a sense of taking risks, of trying something unexpected. One of the better examples of that came when Andrea, in her role as consultant, became frustrated with the "writer" who was focused solely on the teacher's comments on his paper, refusing to discuss the essay itself. Andrea finally grabbed the paper and flung it away, and we could all hear the pages flutter to the ground. She then turned to the writer—his eyes wide with surprise—and asked him to tell her about his topic. It was a beautiful moment.

Granted, Andrea might never literally throw a paper across the room while working in the Center. Nor might any other consultant. But, those who witnessed the moment do understand how it is possible to figuratively cast the paper aside, to step away from the "script" of the standard consultation. As Polsky writes, "Through improvisation—which by its very nature is spontaneous, immediate, and often involves the expression of gut feelings—we can obtain a heightened awareness of ourselves in relation to others" (180).

During the mock consultations we also try to provide support for each other by allowing for suggestions from the audience, should the consultant make that request. I'm not sure we would be performing what Nachmanovitch would properly term a "group improvisation," but I do think, like that type of improvisation, the mock consultations can be a way to establish "powerful and unique friendships" (99). The students see one another working through difficult situations, and in each other I think they see themselves. They realize that they are a group, a collective. And I do believe that sharing improv exercises and mock consultations helps to build the feeling of "centeredness" that Leahy describes, a "sense of purpose and community, of knowing 'who you are' (43). Some consultants remarked on how the exercises showed that we could work on issues "together." And Nate remarked that "after [the improvisation day], I felt so much more relaxed, so much more like I could actually get along OK in the class."

Our centeredness often comes with a laugh, too, as the consultants act out various personalities that were mentioned in the "what-if" questions: an inebriated writer, a five-year-old child who visits the Writing Center with a parent, a smooth-talking pick-up artist, a haughty student forced to schedule a consultation. And in the laughter comes connection, as Davis argues: "The burst of laughter does more to expose us to our being-in-common than any collective mission possibly could" (197). We in the class share the scene, the situation, the work, the risk, and the reward. At the same time, I recognize that not every consultant is one hundred percent comfortable with the improvisation exercises. One mentioned that while she appreciated the lessons we gained from them, she still wouldn't choose to use them again in the class. Overall, though, the response to the exercises has been positive.

One of the risks in writing this essay is well articulated by Boquet, just before she begins to describe Carroll's class—"the risk of scripting and sedimenting what I wish to remain unscripted and unsedimented" (86)—and I want to emphasize that I too am not looking to put forward a set piece. Rather, I want to exalt in "the performances of the players in one particular writing center" (87). In the Boise State Writing Center, we believe that improvisational exercises lead to more freedom and creativity in our consulting work, and also help us better connect with one another. We think they contribute to a "higher-risk/higher-yield model" (81) of consultant education and help us "keep our options open" as consultants (143). And we can ask for nothing more.

ENDNOTES

a. The Boise State Writing Center is open to all students at Boise State, and we draw writers from just about every discipline , especially Health Sciences and Engineering. Most of the consultants are English majors, and so find the assignments and essays far removed from the work they do.

b. I also want to note Steve Sherwood's talk at the 2006 Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference, which highlighted the importance of improvisation in consultations. Though theatre exercises were not mentioned, many similar ideas about risk, play, and humor were.

c. Not surprisingly, the funnier the picture the better. Last year we had a photo of a cat wearing a helmet made out of a lime skin, another of a grown man wearing a diaper, a third of a close-up view of a spider. All were borrowed from various web sites.

d. By no means am I trying to claim credit for the connection, either. Boquet references both of these works, and it was through her work that I discovered Davis's.

e. I also compile all the "what-if" questions together every year and distribute a full list to the class. The questions prove remarkably helpful for sparking conversations and ideas beyond the mock consultations, and we often refer back to them as the students begin their consultation work in the Center. This is not to say that we establish a given procedure for working through each situation. Instead the questions serve as prompts, as jumping-off points for us. And, though I came to the idea from another direction, I will mention that Lerner and Gillespie's chapter on scenarios in the second edition of their book is entitled "What If . . ." A nice overlap. ✦

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Tutor's Column

BATTLING WRITING CENTER PRESENTATION PHOBIA

◆*Christine Adler*
Modesto Junior College

Writing Center presentations can cause what I like to call the "What! I have to speak in front of people?" syndrome. At the mere mention of a classroom presentation, some tutors' hands begin to sweat, eyes begin to bulge, and the heart rate begins to climb dramatically. On the other hand, some tutors, like myself, have learned to channel their nervous energy into an entertaining performance which takes students on an exciting journey down Writing Center lane. Instead of giving a basic speech about what to expect during a tutoring session, I attempt to bring students in to our humble and helpful writing abode by returning to my dramatic roots!

My Writing Center presentation epiphany actually occurred through trial and error. During my first presentation I wasn't in touch with my flair for theatrics; the experience was very disappointing. I remember standing in front of the English Composition class feeling slightly nervous about making my speech. In the past, I never had a problem being the center of attention, but this time I felt a tremendous weight on my shoulders, knowing that I had to make a good impression. After all, the students' perception of the Writing Center hinged on how they perceived me. I proceeded to rehearse my presentation in my mind: "I will pass around the handouts, give a summary about what tutors do and don't do, and then I will ask if anyone has questions." I was well prepared for the task, but as I smiled and looked out at all the different faces, I noticed that no one looked excited. My speech ran smoothly, but I sensed a lack of interest from my audience. I felt discouraged; I didn't believe that I had left a good enough impression.

After some serious self-reflection over a pint of Triple Chocolate Swirl Ice Cream, a moment of true enlightenment occurred: I decided to turn my next presentation into a game show! I quickly dropped the spoon, grabbed a pen, and began brainstorming. I wanted the game to be familiar and fun, but most of all, I wanted it to represent the Writing Center in such a way that students would race through the door to meet with a tutor.

The next opportunity to extend another Writing Center invitation arrived very soon after my realization, and I hurried over to the student store to purchase a prize; after all, the winner of a game needs to be rewarded. When I arrived in the class room I introduced myself, quickly wrote "Wheel of Student" up on the board, and informed the students that we would be playing a game. I held up a tiny teddy bear, holding a heart, and said "The winner will win this adorable little bear!" Suddenly, everyone perked up and I began to hear laughter amidst a sea of smiling faces. The game was simple: everyone had to shout out letters to fill in the blanks that I wrote on the board, which would spell out a word that best described what the Writing Center was all about. The atmosphere was filled with excitement as a variety of voices shouted out letters, trying desperately to fill in the blanks and win the prize. Eventually, a student solved the puzzle, shouting "T-O-G-E-T-H-E-R!" I congratulated the winning student, tossed the teddy bear to the student and encouraged some applause asking "So, can anyone tell me how this word relates to the Writing Center?" The winning student emphatically shouted "Because the tutor and the student work together to accomplish a goal!" I smiled as I looked forward to seeing these students in the Writing Center, very soon. ◆

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CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

October 25-29, 2006: Midwest
    Writing Centers Association, in
    St. Louis, MO
    CONTACT: Susan Mueller at
    smueller@stlcop.edu or Dawn
    Fels at dfels@earthlink.net.
    Conference Web site: <http://
    www.ku.edu/~mwca/>.

February 8-10, 2007: Southeastern
    Writing Center Association, in
    Nashville, TN
    CONTACT: E-mail: SWCA@
    Comcast.net. Conference
    Web site: <www.mtsu.edu/
    ~uwcenter/swca2007>.

March 3, 2007: Northern
    California Writing Center
    Association, in Sacramento,
    CA
    CONTACT: Cheryl Smith at
    smithc@saclink.csus.edu
    and Dan Meltzer at melzer@
    saclink.csus.edu. Conference
    Web site: <http://ncwca.
    stanford.edu/>.

March 30-31, 2007: Mid-
    Atlantic Writing Centers
    Association, in Radnor, PA
    CONTACT: Conference Web
    site:<http://www2.mcdaniel.
    edu/mawca>.

April 12-14, 2007: South Central and
    International Writing Centers
    Associations, in Houston, TX
    CONTACT: Dagmar Corrigan at
    corrigand@uhd.edu; Conference
    Web site: <http://ahss.ualr.edu/
    iwca>.

April 27-29, 2007: Pacific Northwest
    Writing Centers Association, in
    Bellingham, WA
    CONTACT: Sherri Winans at
    Whatcom: http://faculty.whatcom.
    ctc.edu/swinans. Conference Web
    site: <http://www.acadweb.wwu.
    edu/writingcenter/PNWCA.htm>.

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