THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Volume 32, Number 02 | Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing | October, 2007

– FROM THE EDITOR –

In this month's issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, we focus on articles that emphasize the constant interest among those of us in writing centers to look at what we do and to think about how to do it better. In the first of her multi-part series of articles (more to come in future issues!), Paula Gillespie introduces us a new program they've developed to train graduate students to serve as consultants in their own departments. Then Ann Litman reflects on what was not working effectively when their students sign up for online tutoring and how they improved the process. Another tutor training manual, by Margot Iris Soven, is reviewed by Sheryl Cavales Doolan and Alison Brown. Finally, Michael Nelsen looks more closely at ways to present himself more effectively as a peer.

I had hoped to leave the margins outside of articles blank, for your use—to make marginal notes or just to enjoy some white space. But this is a particularly active time of year, and it results in too many announcements to allow those margin spaces to remain blank. There are writing center associations issuing calls for proposals and an announcement of a series of pre-conference workshops. And the deadline for applications for editorial positions for the *Writing Center Journal* are rapidly approaching. So, despite good intentions (and a feeble attempt at pleasing visual design), we have a tightly packed issue.

✦ *Muriel Harris, editor*

INSIDE

GRADUATE WRITING CONSULTANTS FOR PH.D. PROGRAMS *PART 1* : USING WHAT WE KNOW: NETWORKING AND PLANNING

✦ *Paula Gillespie*
Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI

Those of us who routinely train and work with peer tutors know what great benefits accrue to both writers and to the tutors themselves. It goes almost without saying. Almost.

It *almost* goes without saying that students who use the center benefit from our services. They understand their assignments better, they have serious conversations with tutors about their subject matter, and in the process, they deepen their understanding of and expertise in it. They look critically at their organization and support, and in the process, develop a rich conversation with a tutor, both about writing and about their topics. We help writers learn to be more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, to ask themselves questions about their texts, and as a consequence write better documents they can hand in or mail off with pride. While many conceive of us as grammar centers, to this day and despite our best public relations efforts, we have in fact become centers for critical thinking, both for the writers and for the tutors.

Also, the benefits to tutors are so integral to our work that sometimes we forget to remind others

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Editor: Muriel Harris
harrism@purdue.edu
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The RiCH Company, LLC
Richard C. Hay, Founder and CEO
3238 S. 92nd Street
Milwaukee, WI 53227
www.therichco.com
1-888-348-6182

<www.writinglabnewsletter.org>
support@writinglabnewsletter.org

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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 submission@writinglabnewsletter.org.

– those new to our field, our administration, our bosses. They are often unaware that tutors refine and develop their ability to work with others, to listen, to ask helpful, insightful questions. They learn to help writers to think critically about their assigned work. They become keen at analyzing texts quickly and in many different circumstances. They leave us with an earned confidence and with leadership abilities that few other campus experiences can offer them. In a chapter for a forthcoming collection, Harvey Kail, Brad Hughes, and I refer to lasting benefits to tutors as the "second claim" writing centers can make about their service to their institutions. (See research that confirms this at <http://www.mu.edu/writing-center/PeerTutorAlumniPage.htm>).

We have built up a discipline based on diverse theories and rich sources of lore we share – but that we share primarily with one another. Together at conferences we help one another fine tune our processes, think more critically about our work, question our assumptions, and revise our programs. We sometimes try to make our methods and results apparent to our institutions, but often as long as the center is humming along without incident we are taken for granted as part of the work of an institution: to help students succeed, develop, and maintain their focus.

A third claim that almost goes without saying is that when writing centers take central positions in helping institutions meet their goals, everyone benefits. That means that taking part in WAC initiatives, offering workshops for faculty members and students, giving talks to high school students about writing great application essays, sending tutors to work in popular student locations, all of these initiatives draw favorable attention to the writing center, create good will and good publicity, and sometimes pay off in unanticipated ways down the line.

Sometimes we become involved in initiatives that bring all three claims above into play – and into the spotlight. For the last two years the Graduate School and the Ott Memorial Writing Center at Marquette have been involved in creating a new program. We are now training doctoral students[1] from diverse disciplines to be Graduate Writing Consultants for their peers in their programs, using half of their teaching or research assistantship. These graduate students are selected through a process of collaboration between the programs, the graduate school, and the writing center. They are honored with a higher stipend. We have now piloted the first course to train them, using what we know about training English graduate students and undergraduate peer tutors. Two tutors now serve in their departments, working with their colleagues on writing in specialized genres for their disciplines.

As you can well imagine, this project is of necessity collaborative and cooperative, with good will and good energy coming from all over campus – along with a little resistance from programs that cannot afford to release their doctoral students but would like to, if funding could be found. But this project has not happened quickly. I hope that by sharing our process, from the planning to the course delivery to the assessment of the program, you might find it easier to adapt a program of your own, if you would like one. Writing centers are in a unique position to make a program such as this feasible. In doing so, the writing center positions itself differently within the university and calls attention to its solid, respectable, useful work.

This will be the first of a series of articles. It will describe the spadework that got the Marquette Plan off the ground. Further articles will discuss the course development, the pilot study, our assessments of the course, and our assessments of the program.

We did not set out with a goal of establishing such a program. We were originally involved with the Graduate School in a project that gathered data about writing needs of doctoral programs so we could

[1]We hope to extend the program to the masters level after we assess its effectiveness at the Ph.D. level where the need is pressing.

create a best practices document to share with programs. That was a large but manageable project. It grew unexpectedly into the current project to train doctoral students to be writing consultants only gradually, and because the project evolved organically to suit Marquette's individual needs, I did not engage in the formal process of assessing the merits and weighing the down sides of such a project. After the fact, however, the Northern California Writing Centers Association asked me to give a keynote address on interdisciplinary initiatives. As part of this talk I drafted a model we might use to examine our steps and decisions, a model that might help you, if you decide to implement a similar project to which you might want to devote your sometimes-scarce time, finances, and energy. I will refer back to this model as I outline the steps we took to bring our project to its current stage.

INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECTS: TOWARDS A MODEL

KNOW YOUR INSTITUTION

1. Whose interests are being served?
2. How will your project benefit students or faculty members?
3. Where does money come from? How much will the project cost? Who can help you find answers to these questions? Who will help you find funding sources from outside or help you write grant proposals?
4. Who are your supporters?
5. Who are the detractors?
6. Does your immediate supervisor buy in?
    - Will this affect your salary or performance evaluation?
    - Are you looking beyond these factors to larger goals:
        - A more visible role for your writing center
        - Promotion in your institution
        - A move to another institution
7. Who will your partners be?
        - Can you count on them to meet deadlines?
        - Do they have the needed people skills?
        - Will they keep you in the loop?
        - How much does this matter, or is the project of enough importance to you to overlook these things?

How will the project affect you?

8. Will it offer you experiences you want for your professional development?
9. How much time will be involved? Will the project push you beyond your limits for time? Will that be worth it?
10. How will you decide on compensation for your work? If you are working an overload, will you be paid for the extra work? Does this matter, or do you have different goals, as in #6 above?
11. How can you get a sense of the down side of the project?

> "The writing center has emerged as the source of valuable disciplinary knowledge, and tutor training has taken on a whole new life. . . ."

This project started with a collaboration with the then chair of our Physics Department, John Karkheck. He and his colleagues and I worked on a WAC project that got them a sizeable National Science Foundation grant to incorporate writing assignments into the labs to help students better connect lab work to the theories that tie the labs together.

John Karkheck then went on to become Assistant Vice Provost for Graduate Programs, and he took his commitment to writing along with him. He listened to Directors of Graduate Programs as they de-

ANNOUNCEMENTS

SOUTHEASTERN WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Call for Papers
Feb. 7-9, 2008
Savannah, Georgia
"Work in Progress, Destination Unknown"

SWCA's 2008 conference aims to provide a forum for ideas about new directions in writing center practice. Writing center theory—combining aspects of administration, communication, hermeneutics, language, pedagogy, psychology, rhetoric, semiotics, etc.—lies at the heart of writing center practice. Theory, we contend, should be thoughtfully deliberated before new practices are broadly advocated.

Proposals will be evaluated on the basis of theoretical importance, originality, clarity, and relevance to a broad audience. Interactive presentations, discussion panels, and poster displays are especially encouraged. Proposals may address tested theories as well as those still being tested, with an emphasis on novel perspectives, approaches, and methods.

Please forward your proposals/abstracts by Friday, October 12, to Deborah Reese at reesedeb@mail.armstrong.edu. Respondents will be notified of acceptance Monday, October 29, through Friday, November 2. Conference Web site:<www.llp.armstrong.edu/swca/swca2008cfp.html>.

scribed, one after another, problems their graduate students face with writing. When a new Dean of the Graduate School was hired, he, too, brought a strong commitment to assisting graduate students with the writing tasks they faced and a healthy curiosity about ways the writing center could help.

Writing problems at the Ph.D. level are not unique to Marquette's programs. The Council of Graduate Schools, alarmed at the low rate of Ph.D. completion (50% nationwide), has entered into a three-year project to promote retention and raise completion rates. (See <http://www.phdcompletion.org/>). Those of us who work with graduate students in our writing centers know that qualified Ph.D. students can struggle mightily to write clearly about the huge amounts of data they amass. And the genres of their assignments change as well, from the start of their work to their dissertations. As research analyzed by Joe Williams and Gregory Colomb establishes, even accomplished writers will write like novices when given a writing assignment in a new field or discipline.

Some professors interpret this novice writing as inadequate preparation for graduate school, falling into the pattern that Williams and Colomb describe of blaming the previous level of writing instruction for problems rather than seeing that writing development is not a linear process. Others professors, however, expect new graduate students to write like novices and know they need clear guidelines for writing expectations. They know expert writing develops over time as graduate students develop deep as well as wide disciplinary knowledge. They work hard to create the conditions that will foster this expert writing, often at the expense of their own time, as they guide their graduate students and dissertators through the process.

For Marquette, Ph.D. production is of double importance. National rankings require a rate of Ph.D. productivity if we are to maintain the ranking we now have. Because of Marquette's size, our status in the research community, for grant and recruitment purposes, could diminish with just a small drop in Ph.D. productivity. The university wishes not merely to maintain its ranking, but to advance in the rankings. Increasing and strengthening the Ph.D. programs are central aspects in our strategic plan. So it's clear that from the writing center to the Provost's office, successful completion of degrees and a commitment to accepted graduate students is a value we share, along with a goal of freeing up more time for dissertation directors.

To address this concern, the Graduate School and the writing center took on a local collaborative fact-finding project. John Karkheck and I spent the spring and summer of 2005 surveying directors of graduate programs about writing issues and problems at the Ph.D. level. We sent them the following questions via e-mail.

1. When do you learn of writing difficulties?
2. Does the application process help?
3. What writing difficulties do they now present?
4. What written products do they produce?
5. What structured writing activities does the program offer?
6. What activities currently bring students together?

Then we interviewed the directors in person. Each program had its unique take on the issues, predictably enough. Nurses returning for Ph.D.s, for example, work in fields where write-ups of their work are simply turned in as computerized check-lists, so they are required to write very little during their careers, but are highly trained professionals who do not want to be treated as novices, even at writing. Ph.D. students in math and computer science often come to us from other countries and face the challenges of non-native speakers. Engineering directors reported that they have to work with some otherwise brilliant students on the definition of a sentence. All agreed that professors and thesis advisors spend hour upon hour rewriting, revising, and editing for their graduate students, providing the kind of expert help that Shamoon and Burns advocate. But most do so without formal training in one-to-one consulting.

Directors of graduate programs were eager to hear about approaches taken by other programs at Marquette, so after we interviewed the directors of graduate studies, we compiled and disseminated a document detailing best practices in the various programs.

It was during one of these interviews that a Biomedical Engineering director speculated: "If only one of my graduate students could take your peer tutor training class." Immediately I thought of how wrong the tutor training course would be for a graduate student planning to tutor others in his/her program. Our undergraduate peer tutoring course focuses primarily on the needs of undergraduate writers, making many assumptions about the kinds of writing genres, issues, and challenges tutors will face. Its focus is primarily on short essays that improve with thoughtful, open-ended questions and with conversations that lead to revision not only of form but of content, on questions that lead to better levels of critical thinking. We spend time teaching undergraduate peer tutors not to usurp the writing, so that the writer will feel at least some sense of ownership, or so we hope. We tell tutors they don't need extensive expertise in the genres of writing they see; it is up to the writer to know the assignment and know what discourse conventions are expected, though we do discuss various genres and practice some of them in training.

Referring back to the model for interdisciplinary projects, I had excellent partners in the graduate school. They had a very clear sense of the project's cost and of resources for a small pilot. My department chair approved of the idea, though he felt that the tutors in the writing center were well able to help English dissertators. The Graduate School and the Provost's office funded my time, buying me a course release to plan the new course. I was able to fund some other costs with the writing center's endowment. A for-credit course that would fill predictably would be good for the English Department and would need to go through the curriculum committee, but for the pilot we used a Special Topics course.

As the idea took shape, I began reading and gathering data on the writing needs of graduate students who frequent writing centers. I generated some hypotheses, some of which have been borne out and others of which have not, about the nature of the graduate tutorial and about the training that would be needed. I consulted writing center colleagues and friends, getting as much advice as I could, and meanwhile we worked on funding and dissemination of information.

To make this program work, we needed not only agreement between the Graduate School and the writing center, we needed to acquaint all the graduate program directors with the idea, and persuade faculty members that they could spare a research assistant or graduate student. And we would need graduate students excited enough about writing in their fields to bring to the enterprise the same energy that undergraduates do in the peer tutoring class. At a spring 2006 meeting with all graduate directors, we presented the project as we saw it at the time. As a result of that meeting, and of the enthusiastic reception by some programs, we decided to offer the course during the summer of 2006, paying the students a stipend for their time and paying for their tuition if departments and programs would release them for ten hours per week of consulting during the semester. Then we hoped to get outside funding so we could help programs take on additional graduate students if they were needed, to fill in for those working as consultants.

Doctoral program directors saw an advantage to training doctoral students in their own disciplines: they would already possess significant disciplinary and generic knowledge. As the plan began to develop, graduate directors pleaded with us to begin it immediately. Two programs, Theology and Philosophy, each recommended a strong writer who worked well with others to be part of the pilot project.[2] I interviewed them, OKd them with the Graduate School, and we began.

[2] We tried hard to get a math, science, or engineering graduate student to join the project, but while students were eager to take part, their programs could not spare their work the following fall.

NEWS

SOUTH CENTRAL WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

Call for Proposals
March 6-8 2008
Norman, Oklahoma
"Writing Out Loud"
Keynote speaker: Anne Ellen Geller

We invite presentations by directors, peer tutors, graduate students, and staff. Presentations can take any form—from sharing your research to performance art. We look forward to a variety of formats that will involve the audience.

Information on travel and accommodations is up on the Web site: <http://www.ou.edu/writingcenter/scwca08/>.

To submit a proposal, include the names and e-mails of all presenters; title of presentation; format (panel, roundtable, performance, workshop, etc.); 100-word abstract; and 300-word proposal. Send this as a WORD document attached to an e-mail with the subject line "SCWCA08 Proposal" E-mail to: writingcenter@ou.edu.

DEADLINE FOR PROPOSALS: NOVEMBER 1, 2007. Questions: Michele Eodice (meodice@ou.edu) or Tara Nielsen (on site planner) (taran@ou.edu).

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Williams, Joseph M., and Gregory G. Colomb. "Chapter 5, the University of Chicago." *Programs that Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum.* Ed. Toby Fulwiler and Art Young. 1st ed. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1990. 83.

Of course, we considered having the graduate writing consultants work out of the writing center. But we decided that they should be present in the halls and offices and labs where their colleagues work, so drop-ins would be more likely, and where resources such as discipline-specific handouts would be easily available. We want them to work near their faculty members, where their work is visible, and we want the programs to feel a strong ownership of this plan.

There are certainly precedents for a writing center staffed by graduate students from departments outside English or Rhetoric and Composition. The University of Southern California's center is staffed by graduate tutors from all disciplines. So is the one at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Ron Scheer and Anne Ellen Geller, directors of these centers, were generous with their time, telling me about their centers and their ongoing staff development. They train these tutors the semester they are hired; the tutors then work with writers from all disciplines, graduate and undergraduate.

Our course has consultants read theoretical and practical articles and books on the writing and the tutoring process, and they learn about working with ESL students. They learn how to observe others and make sense of the observations. But they also interview faculty members from their programs about the assignments they make for graduate-level writing in courses. Out of these interviews and from other sources, the graduate writing consultants develop materials their peers might find valuable—successful papers written to satisfy an assignment, handouts that instructors have created, handouts from the writing center and some of the OWLs they've learned about. In other words, as they become tutors, they develop resources specifically for their programs. They analyze, discuss, and describe for their peers the disciplinary conventions of course papers, conference papers, papers for submission to journals, and other genres such as posters and presentations. During their training they work with writers from outside their disciplines, but after they complete the course, they work only with their peers in their Ph.D. programs. We have now piloted the course, and the doctoral students who took it have been treated as heroes in their departments. They have a valuable credential that will be looked at very favorably as they enter the job market, and their peers all seem to know about and value their services.

Clearly this was not an endeavor that the writing center could simply embark on and do alone. The project has been time-consuming, and has required significant amounts of networking, communication, and collaboration. But so far the enthusiasm at Marquette is buoying.

The two consultants have been asked to make presentations at orientation and at faculty meetings. They have modified writing center publicity material and made flyers and handouts of their own. They say that their departmental climate has changed, partly in response to the increased talk about the function and evaluation of writing in Ph.D. programs. We have assessed the program informally along the way, but we are in the process of having a more formal assessment done, as we plan for next summer's course, which we hope to make available to four students.

This has been some of the most exciting, satisfying, enjoyable work I've done as a writing center director. Departments are delighted with the results they have seen so far; eventually we hope to see statistics that show an increase of retention and graduation rates. The writing center has emerged as the source of valuable disciplinary knowledge, and tutor training has taken on a whole new life as it helps the Graduate School, the graduate faculty, the graduate students, and the university to meet its goals, present and future. ✦

CLARITY IN ONLINE TUTORING PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

✦ *Ann Litman*
Dusquesne University,
Pittsburgh, PA

In the Fall of 2005, three other consultants and I implemented a synchronous online tutoring pilot program at the University of Pittsburgh Writing Center. Developing the program challenged us to acknowledge student expectations and adapt our services in response. We discovered that clear, explicit communication with students during appointment setting, advertising and promotion, and online communication made our service most effective.

Because online tutoring was new to students, they didn't know what to expect. Many students hadn't used our Writing Center services and were unaware of how tutorials worked. They did realize, however, that conversation would be involved. In face-to-face (f2f) tutorials, students sometimes hope to listen or let a tutor do most of the work. In online sessions, students knew that they would not be able to evade conversation by nodding or not responding. Students quickly saw that both participants had to contribute for the online conversation to continue.

Students were familiar with online conversation, so they weren't anxious about tutorials. Instead, they had reservations about the appointment-setting process. To make an appointment, a student sent an e-mail requesting an appointment and waited for a reply, which stated the appointment date and time and asked for information about the student. This initial e-mail paralleled the Center's f2f intake form. The student replied to the e-mail with his paper attached, then "showed up" online at the appointed time. Students saw this process as complicated. It was slower than making an appointment over the phone, and it was one-sided, with no one to ask questions to directly. Our communication with students here was understandably confusing because the e-mail asked the student to *do* multiple things—provide general information, identify session goals—and also to *process* multiple things—the appointment time, information about the appointment process. We addressed confusion by revising the e-mail, aligning it with the program's goals and clarifying its messages.

The original e-mail was informative, yet it failed to welcome students or establish any ideas about tutorial work. Revisions to tone made this initial communication a welcoming introduction to the program. A line in the e-mail that read, "If you do not respond to this e-mail prior to your appointment, your appointment may be cancelled in order to free up time for another student" was changed to, "Please respond to this e-mail prior to your appointment so we can keep this time slot reserved for you." The message remained the same, but attention to tone clarified the fact that online tutoring was a service we were eager to provide.

The revised e-mail also communicated the idea of the tutorial as collaborative work. Where the original e-mail stated, "The Writing Center consultant you work with will begin looking at your paper when your appointment begins," the revised e-mail stated, "The Writing Center consultant you work with will see your paper for the first time when your appointment begins. At that time, you and the consultant will begin looking at and discussing your paper together." The latter established the idea that the tutor and student would work together during the tutorial.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

WCJ Editorial Search

The International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) invites applications for editorial leadership of the *Writing Center Journal (WCJ)*. For a list of criteria and guidelines for applications, see <writing-centers.org>. The deadline for applications is Oct. 15, and should be mailed or e-mailed to Harry Denny, Institute for Writing Studies, St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens, NY 11439; e-mail: dennyh@stjohns.edu.

✦✦ ✦

Correction

In the September issue of *WLN* (Vol. 32.1), Elizabeth Florian's name was inadvertently missing from the list of authors of "Response to 'Prattle of the Sexes" on p. 11. She is the first tutor who offers a response on page 12.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

EAST CENTRAL WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION CALL FOR PAPERS

April 11 and 12, 2008
Columbus, Ohio
"Looking Back; Looking Forward: The Next 30 Years of ECWCA"
Keynote speaker: Andrea Lunsford

As ECWCA marks its 30th anniversary, this year's conference will engage histories of writing centers and how they influence the future. We'll look to the past in order to understand what's coming. In this spirit, we invite submissions on any aspect of writing centers. Come and join our conversation! Submissions are due by December 28th at <www.ecwca.org>.

Session formats:

- Presentations—single or multiple authored talks
- Panels—groups of 3-4 presentations on related topics
- Roundtables—conversations among 5-7 participants
- Posters—multimedia or paper-based works that describe writing centers in the ECWCA area (Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and parts of Kentucky, Illinois, and Pennsylvania), and their histories or plans.

A limited number of scholarships will be available for student tutors. We will also be holding the ECWCA logo contest. More information is forthcoming. See <www.ecwca.org> for registration information.

We paid special attention to the line above because of a particular challenge we encountered in acknowledging students' expectations: the assumption on several students' parts that the tutor would have read their papers prior to the tutorial. This assumption arose because students sent their papers via e-mail to the tutor prior to the appointment. Tutors requested papers ahead of time to counteract potentially delayed e-mails and to allow time to open files before the tutorial, but students assumed the tutor wanted their papers ahead of time to read them. The e-mail specified this policy from the beginning, but it appeared near the message's end. In revising for clarity, we gave this information a more visible location near the e-mail's beginning, and students no longer expressed confusion about the issue.

In addition to revising for clarity and tone, we took into consideration general Center concerns about letting students know up front what services the program encompassed. Because students sometimes think tutorial services include proofreading or editing, we considered specifying in the e-mail what services we didn't offer. However, Peter Carino explains that broadcasting maxims such as "We don't proofread" can incite thoughts that never existed: perhaps a student hadn't considered proofreading as a potential service and would now not only focus on the lack of its availability but on the suggestion that he did make this assumption (101). We needed to let students know how our service worked, but we didn't want to overload students with rules the first time they contacted us. This consideration resulted in a line added to the intake e-mail providing a link to the Writing Center's Web site and explaining that all information on the site about Center services applied to online tutoring. If a student wondered what services a tutorial made available, he could seek out the information, and if a student entered a tutorial misinformed, we could direct him to the Web site.

Within the appointment-setting process, clarity helped us communicate effectively with students. Clarity also worked prior to appointment setting, in promoting and advertising the program.

We advertised by distributing flyers at the Center and in writing classes, targeting students who already used Center services in addition to those who did not. Our advertising was most effective when it was most explicit. Because clarity helped at all steps of the online tutoring process, we attempted to convey clearly in our written dialogue with students exactly what it was we were doing.

This was a struggle for the Pitt program, because in the attempt to be as clear and explicit as possible, we mistakenly explained too much. During the program's pilot, we used two different flyers to advertise. One flyer geared the service to a younger crowd—students who were already familiar with online communication. This flyer contained, in addition to the basic necessary information, a list of screennames used for online tutoring, which was information that students didn't need up front. We thought students might want this information to add a tutor to their buddy lists. As our advertising became more explicit in this way, it became information-heavy and confused numerous students. To begin the online tutoring process, students only needed to send an e-mail requesting an appointment, but they began calling the Center, unsure of what to do with all the flyer's information. A second flyer, which didn't take a specific audience into consideration, attempted to convey only the information necessary for a student to begin to use our service. We had better results with this second flyer because it was more concise and more easily understood by students.

Our hope in advertising online tutoring was that by making the information we provided to students clear, we would anticipate and answer their questions while smoothing the transition from real-time appoint-

ment-setting to e-mail-based appointment-setting. Because too much information in flyers confused students, we visited classrooms to explain the program in detail. Doing so gave us the chance to explain to students how the program worked. This explanation helped offset some student insecurities about not being able to interact in real-time during the appointment-setting process. Communicating clearly in classroom visits was easy because students had the opportunity to ask questions, prompting further explanation when necessary.

Once we began tutoring online, clarity became equally important during tutorials. Consciously developing an online presence as tutors helped us communicate effectively.

Deciding how much to reveal to students online was a personal choice. As a tutor, I could have remained anonymous, letting only the screenname "PittWCTutor" indicate my presence; or I could have filled in the blanks, giving students my name and sharing that I was a composition teacher at Pitt. There were fewer options, however, in deciding what presence to develop as an online tutor. Online communication removed the ability to rely on body language and visual cues during conversation, so we compensated by being more directive in tutorials. As we were taking extra steps to guide students online, we also wanted to maintain our distance so writers could guide the direction of the tutorial.

Finding this balance between directive and nondirective guidance was more difficult in online tutoring than in f2f. However, the ideal online presence fulfilled the same goal as in a f2f tutorial, with the tutor guiding a student to become a better writer while also showing the student tools so that the student becomes his own tutor. Justin Jackson calls this "present absence" and explains that one of the "tenuous roles of the tutor" is "to establish one's presence online, to establish a "voice," but to avoid becoming the faceless Superman with all of the answers." He adds, "We want our students to discover their *writerness* not because of us but because of the questions they ask [us]" (4). Jackson's explanation ties in with the student expectation of conversation. Because students knew contributing to the conversation was necessary, they were more likely to ask questions and fuel the analyzing process themselves. When we established ourselves as online tutors who were sometimes directive and simultaneously invisible, we could guide students to reproduce the learning process by teaching them tools to use on their own.

Acknowledging students' perspectives helped us communicate more clearly online. Likewise, keeping students' views in mind made it possible to clarify our program in light of their expectations and the program's newness. We eased students into online tutoring and made our interactions within them most effective by striving for clarity in each aspect of the program. ✦

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✦

TAKE NOTE

MIDWEST WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Pre-Conference Workshops October 25, 2007 Kansas City

MWCA has announced they will be offering pre-conference workshops for Thursday, Oct. 25, on three topics: K-12 writing centers, anti-racist activism, and tutor training. You may register for one or two of the three workshops when registering for the conference online (<pages.usiouxfalls.edu/mwca/mwca07/regguide.htm>) or when checking in onsite the day of the workshop. The K-12 session is an all-day workshop with lunch included in the total cost of $50, and the others are each $25 and three hours in length. For more complete descriptions of the workshops, please contact Beth Godbee (godbeebeth@gmail.com), who posted the descriptions on WCenter, or Thomas Ferrel (ferrelt@umkc.edu), the conference chair.

BOOK REVIEW: *WHAT THE WRITING TUTOR NEEDS TO KNOW* BY MARGOT IRIS SOVEN. (HEINLE. $18 (ISBN: 9781413002249)

✦ *Reviewed by Sheryl Cavales Doolan*
Santa Rosa Junior College
Santa Rosa, CA

Margot Iris Soven's *What the Writing Tutor Needs to Know* is a helpful resource when training writing tutors. This flexible text can be adapted to suit any of the many ways we train tutors, from one-day workshops to full-semester courses. Moreover, this text is appropriate for training in any of the myriad places we find writing tutors: learning centers, student resource centers, writing centers, or Writing Fellows Programs. Soven neatly integrates theory within each chapter of the book. Chapter 1: "Peer Tutoring and College Writing: Peer Tutoring Works!" and Chapter 5: "The Writing Process of College Students" lay the foundation of peer tutoring and composition theory that undergirds reflective tutoring practice. The particulars of that reflective practice are detailed in Chapter 2: "Where We Tutor—How We Tutor"; Chapter 3: "How to Conference and Write Comments"; and Chapter 4: "Common Writing Problems: Focus, Organization, Development, Style, and Correctness." The remaining chapters, Chapter 6: "Tutoring Special Students"; Chapter 7: "Teacher Expectations, Writing Assignments, and Peer Tutoring: What's the Connection?"; and Chapter 8: "Tutoring Online: An Option—But Is It a Good One?" address special concerns in tutoring writing. Each chapter concludes with a list of "Questions for Discussion and Writing" that serve as effective points of departure for engaging tutors with the ideas and issues presented in the chapter. The chapters can easily be taken individually and incorporated as needed into training curriculum; in fact, trainers may find it preferable to work with chapters that are related thematically, as the independent quality of each chapter that defines its versatility may also make it challenging to teach the text as a cohesive whole in sequential order.

While the strengths of *What the Writing Tutor Needs to Know* are many—ample concrete examples, easily comprehensible language for students who may not be interested in learning composition theory, advice from experienced tutors—the most impressive aspect of this text for me is rooted in Soven's experience with the different models of tutoring writing. My own experience with training tutors comes from a brief but momentous sojourn as Interim Director of the Sonoma State University Writing Center. I have worked in various models of writing centers and writing labs, some employing peer tutors, some not. At my current institution, our writing center is staffed by instructional aides and faculty members from the English Department. Here, a Writing Fellows Program may offer unexplored opportunities for future service to students. Because I was raised in the writing center world, I am most interested in how the goals and philosophies of writing centers and Writing Fellows Programs coincide and cross; I believe others like me who may be looking at writing centers or Writing Fellows Programs as two potential options for restructuring or establishing an alternative writing instruction service will also benefit from Soven's twenty-plus years of experience in training tutors in many venues. The author's breadth of experience informs her writing in ways that illustrate her knowledge of the complexity of differing models of tutoring, which is particularly helpful to tutor trainers in different programs, while not compromising her ability to make these concepts easily understandable for tutors.

Soven addresses the two models of tutoring throughout her text. Obviously, the primary audience is specifically writing tutors, and Soven takes special efforts to address the needs of new tutors, especially those who may have "peer tutoring jitters." More broadly though, the audience encompasses two different paradigms of writing tutoring: the curriculum-based model of peer tutoring, also called Writing Fellows Programs, and the individual one-to-one conference model of writing centers. Certainly, the commonalties between the foundational theories of writing centers and Writing Fellows Programs are apparent: tutors in both models work with students to become better writers by way of examining student writing. However, the working philosophies of these models can yield complex differences in not only tutoring practice, but also in how that practice is taught.

The best example of this difference in programs is found in Chapter 7: "Teacher Expectations, Writing Assignments, and Peer Tutoring." Due to the inherent structural differences of writing centers and Writing Fellows Programs, the relationship between tutor and instructor will be considerably more complicated and involved in a Writing Fellows Program than in a writing center. In a writing center, the typical interaction between a tutor and an instructor is limited to the tutor reading the assignment prompt the instructor has written, and then only if the student has brought the prompt to the session. The ability to divine a teacher's expectations often comes from the tutor's own experience and familiarity with either the teacher or the conventions of the discipline in which the student is writing, whereas a Writing Fellow may meet with the instructor several times. Because a tutor from a Writing Fellows Program reads all the student papers in the class, she will more easily see if a particular assignment is problematic or unclear; also, she has the chance to become familiar with the teacher's grading style and/or rubric, something into which writing center tutors rarely gain insight. Where a writing center tutor could potentially neglect a teacher's expectations, a Writing Fellows tutor could feel pressure to let the teacher's expectations dominate conferences, making sessions less about improving the writer in general, and more about pleasing the instructor in order to earn a better grade.

To what extent should teachers' expectations be addressed in conferences with students? Soven artfully addresses this fundamental pedagogical question throughout the chapter, explaining that though a tutor (from either a Writing Fellows Program or a writing center) should acknowledge the invisible yet palpable presence of the instructor, a good tutor:

> understands that knowing the teacher's expectations is just one part, albeit an important one, of the writing tutor's responsibilities. She must still decide how to conduct the tutoring session in light of the condition of the paper and what she learns about the student, from both the paper and meeting the student in person if she has that opportunity. (138)

Although tutors in writing centers and those in Writing Fellows Programs will have differing levels of interaction with instructors, the advice Soven offers is invaluable to tutors in both programs; teachers' expectations will take on different degrees of importance for the two models of tutoring, but should still be treated as a tool to guide tutoring practice rather than as a defining principle of tutoring. Even for trainers who believe strongly that tutors should help students meet assignment parameters but should not cater to individual teacher's expectations and grading practices, Soven's text is still appropriate for framing the discussion with tutors of teachers' expectations and their significance in the particular institutional context of that trainer. Some trainers may be hesitant to use sections of the text that can be so fraught, such as the extent to which we allow teachers' expectations to influence our conferences, but I find that those instances in training where pedagogical or theoretical differences arise end up yielding some of the richest, most interesting discussions for tutors, particularly once tutors have gained a frame of reference through their own experiences tutoring.

Another favorite chapter for me, for entirely different reasons, is Chapter 4: "Common Writing Problems." Other tutor training guides offer the "what to expect" sections, and Soven does the same but with a remarkable level of detail, offering thorough descriptions of how to start assessing students' goals (short-range, long-range) and how to prioritize problems to be addressed (does the paper address the assignment fully?). She also provides examples of potential problems and offers several suggestions of what tutors could say and do in those situations. Like the 2nd and 3rd chapters on what tutoring sessions look like and how to give feedback in person and in writing, this chapter demonstrates an almost obsessive level of detail that is necessary to help assuage anxieties in novice tutors by demystifying the tutoring process. For nearly five years at the SSU Writing Center, the final staff meeting of the year is dedicated to tutors writing letters of advice addressed to the incoming staff of the upcoming year. One of the most often repeated lessons these tutors offer is, "Trust that you know how to tutor" because those tutors remember the anxiety and self-doubt that can plague a new tutor who is, in other scenarios, normally confident and highly skilled. Soven is sensitive to this phenomenon, and both the tone and the content of her writing function to alleviate tutors' fears. For new directors, coordinators, or other-titled tutor trainers who are new to the writing center and Writing Fellows Program worlds, this text is helpful in understanding what new tutors face, especially as many highly qualified and talented tutors who dazzled in interviews come into the first training session (or maybe even the first day of tutoring) looking nervous and scared.

Overall, *What the Writing Tutor Needs to Know* is a valuable addition to tutor training materials that can easily be adapted to suit the needs of particular contexts. Despite differences in program structure, pedagogical theory, and even philosophical missions, both Writing Fellows Programs and traditional writing centers can benefit from incorporating Soven's work into their training curriculum.

BOOK REVIEW: *WHAT A WRITING TUTOR NEEDS TO KNOW* (CONT.)

✦ *Reviewed by Alison Brown*
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Writing tutor training can inhabit a precarious space in the context of the academic discourse of university writing centers. While writing centers are considered by many in the academic community to be a standardized resource on university campuses, the manner in which the peer-tutors are trained to work in such centers is by no means standardized. Some centers require their students to take a course in tutoring writing, which may or may not be offered for academic credit, while others train tutors in a short workshop style over one or more days, typically held directly before the commencement of the fall term. Other writing centers extend this type of training over a term by requiring their tutors to attend staff development meetings or to read and/or respond to selections of readings from influential voices within the writing center discourse. Yet, as any reader of *WLN* or member of WCenter can assert, even the texts selected for use in tutor trainings are by no means standardized.

Soven's new text enters into a mutable area of writing center literature: tutor training materials. *What a Writing Tutor Needs to Know* joins the company of such texts as *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* and *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, which are designed in terms of direct pedagogical implications. That is, Soven's text is clearly constructed for use in conjunction with a school-sponsored training workshop or course. While some centers construct compilations of readings, including examples of both theory and practice, Soven's text is designed to function as the primary reading for a writing tutor or writing fellow training course. In eight content-specific chapters and an introduction to both tutor and trainer, Soven's text may be used in its entirety throughout a training course, or specific chapters may be selected for use during shorter or need-specific training sessions.

As someone who has been involved with several different models of tutor training, I have spent a considerable amount of time researching and conceptualizing both the existing and ideal content and modality of a writing tutor-training course. A significant part of this research has been to evaluate the most effective method for training writing tutors, including which materials to include in various tutoring models. Therefore, I have approached Soven's text as a conscious consumer of training materials. From this perspective, I can enthusiastically assert that Soven's text is an accessible, comprehensible, and a much-needed addition to the growing field of writing tutor training materials.

The experience and expertise of the author function as one of the primary strengths of *What a Writing Tutor Needs to Know.* She is a professor of English at La Salle University, where she teaches courses in both literature and composition. She is also the Writing Fellows Program coordinator and the director of the Core Curriculum at La Salle. She has also authored several other texts regarding writing instruction and writing across the curriculum: *Teaching Writing in Middle and Secondary Schools, Writings From the Workplace* (co-authored with Carolyn Boirasky), *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs* (co-authored with Susan McLeod), and *Write to Learn: A Guide to Writing Across the Curriculum.* Her areas of research and years of experience lend Soven an authoritative, yet compassionate voice to the training pedagogy of *What a Writing Tutor Needs to Know.* Moreover, Soven's expertise in the field of writing across the curriculum affords her a more discipline-specific approach to training tutors that is not always accounted for in other training materials.

The chapters of this text include both theoretical foundations for specific tutoring practices, as well as useful steps for actual practice. In this sense, the chapters contain practical advice for tutors, which are supported by a theoretical foundation. The large majority of issues discussed in the different chapters are accompanied by clear examples of these issues. Most chapters include samples of student work, which are explicated by either Soven or one of her writing tutors (or writing fellows) from La Salle University. Additionally, interwoven throughout each chapter are the relevant, first hand experiences of both Dr. Soven and several of the La Salle tutors, which work to illuminate the experiences and phenomena discussed in each section. At the end of each chapter, questions for discussion and writing prompts afford beginning writing tutors the opportunity to begin to process the wealth of information covered in the chapter.

As already stated, one of the practical strong points of the book is its organization. The text is laid out in such a way that it may serve as the primary reading for an ongoing training course or be broken into chapters for more specific or shorter training modules. Soven is keenly aware of the usefulness of this organizational set up and occasionally draws the reader's attention to how the text may be best utilized. She notes that:

> Chapters 1-4 were designed to give [the tutor] the survival skills [he or she] need[s] to start tutoring and an overview of theory and research which support the strategies discussed in the first half of the book. For [the tutor] to hone these skills, to apply them selectively, [he or she] need[s] to know more about the main parts of the tutoring equation: the students, the assignments, and the tutoring process itself. (88)

Thus, Soven delineates the layout of the text between the necessary "survival skills" and "the main parts of the tutoring equations," which, depending on the mode and duration of one's training schedule, could lend itself to a training course or workshop with great efficiency (88).

Soven's treatment of critical texts from both writing center and composition discourse adds to the text's development as an effective training material. Relevant excerpts from well-known training manuals and theory alike, are presented through Soven's perspective, making both the practical and the theoretical digestible for new tutors. For example, after summarizing Kenneth Bruffee's landmark essay, "Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind," in Chapter 1, Soven highlights the relevancy of such a text for her readers: "The way I see it, theory and research strengthen one's commitment to accepted practices and encourage a positive attitude to self-sponsored research and discovery" (4). The use of such key texts in the writing center discourse makes the book an attractive candidate for use in a training course. Soven's integration of key secondary sources may be extremely useful for writing tutor trainers who have neither the time nor the resources to instruct such texts in their own right.

Given the strengths of Soven's book, I believe that it could be easily integrated into a pre-existing writing tutor training module, or similarly, that a training module may be designed specially around the text. Each chapter delves into themes and practices with which successful writing tutors should be familiar. New writing tutors may take comfort in the reflections on tutoring from La Salle's experienced writing tutors and fellows. Similarly, the discussion questions and outlines for activities located at the end of each chapter may encourage the readers to reflect on their own experiences in such a way as to encourage a meta-reflection about the role and responsibilities of a writing tutor. Moreover, the sample assignments and sample student papers located in almost every chapter could be implemented into a variety of different training models, again contingent on available resources.

However, the specific situations and politics of each university must also be addressed in a valuable tutor-training course. For example, Dr. Soven couches the majority of her themes in terms of the local context of La Salle University, which operates both a writing center and a writing fellows program. The tutoring situation at La Salle may not be similar to the situation at other institutions, which are training writing tutors. The relevant lessons of the text must be re-envisioned for one's own location. Therefore, *What a Writing Tutor Needs to Know* must eventually be supplemented with materials that address the specific needs of the student population with whom the new writing tutors will be working. For example, while Soven gives a brief overview of tutoring students with learning disabilities, writing tutor trainers should include more detailed information regarding this subject in their training module, if there is a larger percentage of students with learning disabilities at their specific institution. Thus, while Soven's text provides an excellent foundation from which to train writing tutors, responsible writing tutor trainers will need to locally contextualize this information in order to efficiently support the student population that tutors serve.

While *What a Writing Tutor Needs to Know* may appear to be only a slim handbook for developing writing tutors, it is in fact much more. The text is crammed with relevant, and necessary, information regarding the theoretical background and successful practices of peer writing tutors at the college level. And yet, despite the wealth of information presented in this text, it is by no means overwhelming or inaccessible. Soven presents necessary information in an explanatory and easy-to-read tone, which makes the text interesting and accessible. Moreover, Soven makes use of her personal experiences with the Writing Fellows program at La Salle to highlight crucial issues in the tutoring process and to invite readers to share in the lessons learned from her practices. This text can be easily implemented into a writing tutor training modality of infinite sizes and forms and is a much welcome addition to an area of writing center discourse which is not fully developed. ✦

TUTOR'S COLUMN

A-PEER-ANCES CAN BE DECEIVING

✦ *Michael Nelsen*
Utah State University
Logan, UT

"Your eyes can deceive you – don't trust them." [1]

I sometimes wish that as a tutor, I could employ this same wisdom and technique that Obi-Wan Kenobi did with Luke Skywalker; place a shield over the eyes of my students and truly remove those eyes and their associated perceptions from the dynamic of our session. What would cause me to wish such a thing? As a tutor, I have discovered two disadvantageous attributes of my position and presence—I am forty, and I'm a teacher. Neither one of these aspects is necessarily negative outside of the writing center; however, within that space, I have come to suspect that they combine to prevent me from becoming a true "peer" to the students that I tutor.

The concept of peer tutoring is the cornerstone of the writing center, and the philosophy that nurtures its success. The word "peer" derives from the Latin, *par*, or equal, and originally described an absence of socioeconomic difference between noblemen. In the modern context of the writing center, there is no socioeconomic or geographical requirement—tutors and students from all walks and disciplines of life, engaged in the mutual experience of higher education, mentor each other through the writing process in a safe, comfortable, and equal environment.

Ideals and reality, however, seldom find themselves *par,* and the writing center is no exception. Many dynamics enter the equation, struggling to disturb the balance between students and tutors that writing centers work so tirelessly to create. Beyond my stated disparities of age and authority/position, there are levels of academic achievement, gender, cultural norms, and life experience; all constitute dynamics of disparity that can potentially rupture the aura of a good writing center experience. Is it possible to negate or to a great extent diminish the influence of these dynamics within our sessions? After some experimentation with the controllable aspects of my age and position, I've come to believe that it is both possible and likely.

Preventing an unsettling of the peer relationship in the writing center relies on another balance—an important balance, between writing center procedure and tutor personality. For example: as a first-year composition instructor, in compliance with writing center procedure, I am not allowed to tutor my own students. I strive to be an amiable teacher and to be quite personable with my students, particularly when conferencing with them about their work on an individual basis. Arguably I am more familiar with their writing foibles and strengths than anyone else. But, I am still their instructor, and writing centers have learned through experience and experimentation that dynamics of authority such as the student-teacher relationship are simply too strong too overcome. Policy in this regard weigh heavily in favor of the student/tutee, and rightly so.

From a personality standpoint, there are a number of things that I can do to wrestle the natural disparities between my tutees and me into positions that prevent stress and nervousness, and strengthen the peer relationship. Oddly enough, one of the most effective tactics stems from my personal dress code. When teaching, I am rarely dressed in anything less formal than a shirt and tie. It's comfortable and reflects my personal respect for my students and my position. After a few initial sessions as a tutor in the writing center, I realized that the first thing

many of the tutees looked at as I greeted them was my clothing. Many of those first sessions did not feel relaxed, and I wondered if my appearance might be representing an unintentional, but nonetheless valid, dynamic of authority that was affecting my ability to be accepted as their peer.

In subsequent sessions over the next few weeks, I alternated my clothing style between my normal "professional" threads and more casual approaches like sweatshirts. There was a notable difference in the tutees initial reaction to me as a tutor—and surprisingly, a notable difference in how I felt as well. I came to realize that I had been unconsciously perpetuating the authority dynamic; dressing down put me at ease and helped me accept *myself* as a peer.

The age dynamic, for me, has been relatively easy to address, because I have children that are nearly the same age as a majority of the students that I tutor. I am familiar with (most) of the styles and behaviors they exhibit, listen to the same music, watch the same media offerings, and feel comfortable around them. Our sessions often begin with banter about local and national sports, current celebrity or news events, or the sharing of a good joke. I don't act like an old curmudgeon, or present an air of I've *lived longer than you have so listen up!* Students have an uncanny ability to detect falsity in personality—being genuine is the most effective way to put them at ease and erase the age stigma.

Each tutor and each student bring different dynamics to the tables of the writing center. As tutors, it is up to us to understand the balance between policy and personality, recognize personal power issues that we employ, consciously or unconsciously, and make a concerted effort to shed those skins before we sit down with a student.

What is the payoff for all of this self appraisal and effort? If we can truly accomplish the peer dynamic, then at the end of each tutoring session, we can walk each tutee to the door with an internal nod to the wisdom of Obi-Wan Kenobi, hoping that the session has resulted in each of us "taking [our] first step into a much larger world." ✦

[1] Sir Alec Guiness as Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*. Dir. George Lucas. Lucasfilm, 1977.

✦

CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

Oct. 19-20, 2007: Michigan Tutoring Association/Michigan Writing Centers Association, in Muskegon, MI
Contact: Conference Web site: <http://www.michigan-tutors.org/mta_conferences.htm>.

Oct. 25-27, 2007: Midwest Writing Centers Conference, in Kansas City, MO
Contact: Thomas Ferrel at ferrelt@umkc.edu. Conference Web site: <http://www.usiouxfalls.edu/mwca/mwca07>.

Oct. 26-27, 2007: Middle East and North Africa Writing Centers Association, in Doha, Qatar
Contact: Cecelia Hawkins at cecella.hawkins@qatar.tamu.edu.

Nov. 7-8, 2007: Hellenic American University, in Athens, Greece
Contact: writing@hau.gr. Conference Web site: <http://writing.hau.gr>.

Feb. 7-9, 2008: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Savannah, GA
Contact: Deborah H. Reese: reesedeb@mail.armstrong. edu; 912-921-2329. Conference Web site: <http://www.llp.armstrong.edu/swca/swca2008cfp.html>.

March 6-8, 2007: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Norman OK
Contact: Michele Eodice at meodice@ou.edu. Conference Web site: <http://www.ou.edu/writingcenter/scwca08>.

April 11-12, 2008: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Columbus, OH
Contact: Doug Dangler: dangler.6@osu.edu. Conference Web site: <http://www.ecwca.org>.

June 19-22, 2008: European Writing Centers Conference, in Freiburg, Germany
Contact: Gerd Braeuer at braeuer@ph-freiburg.de; Conference Web site: <http://www.ph-freiburg.de/ewca2008/>.

Oct. 30-Nov.1, 2008: International Writing Centers Association/National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, in Las Vegas, NV
Contact: Conference Web site: <http://departments.weber.edu/writingcenter/IWCA.htm>.

THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Muriel Harris, editor
The RiCH Company
3238 S. 92nd St.
Milwaukee, WI 53227

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