THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

– FROM THE EDITOR –

With this month's issue of *WLN*, I happily announce that Mike Mattison (Boise State) and Janet Auten (American University) have been selected by the IWCA selection committee as associate editors for *WLN*. They are both superbly qualified for the job and will soon begin taking on various responsibilities (most notably to oversee the work of having manuscripts reviewed). We welcome them both and know that *WLN* will benefit greatly from their skills and dedication to keeping *WLN* a publication you look forward to reading.

In this issue Andrea Muldoon reflects on what she has learned as a new writing center director setting up a new writing center. She invites other new directors to share their experiences and insights, and I hope that invitation is one that some of you new directors will accept by sharing your own hard-won insights. Then, Steve Sherwood takes up a theme we are all sadly familiar with, the scapegoating of the writing center by students and faculty. His examples may make us cringe (in recognition?), but his strategies for dealing with these problems can suggest how others can deal with this recurring situation.

In the article, "Structuring Chaos," Amy Getty and her tutors explain how exploring their own writing processes helps them as tutors when working with students, and Emily Plummer reminds us how important small talk is at the beginning of a tutorial, an especially useful reminder for new tutors. In sum, this is an issue I hope you find useful—and a good excuse to sit down, coffee cup in hand, to read.

✦ *Muriel Harris, editor*

ƗNSIDE

SO, YOU HELPED CREATE A NEW WRITING CENTER —NOW WHAT?: LESSONS AND REFLECTIONS FROM A FIRST-YEAR DIRECTOR

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As first- and second-year junior faculty members, my colleague and I were thrilled when our chancellor, amid yet another tight budget year, enthusiastically accepted our proposal for a new campus writing center. As one of just three four-year institutions in the University of Wisconsin System without a writing center, the establishment of our own center had been long awaited by many of our campus colleagues. For a brief "honeymoon" period, my new fellow co-director and I basked in the glory of what we had accomplished; the chancellor, after all, had agreed to our full budget request for staff stipends, furniture, and supplies; precious course release time for both of us; and training support and print resources/materials for our center.

This honeymoon phase began to wear off quickly, however, as the reality of the work that lay ahead of us began to unfold. This reality became even more daunting when we discovered that when it came to directing a *brand new* writing center, our previous graduate training at large research institutions with established, thriving centers didn't serve as a very helpful blueprint. Further, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. the IWCA website's section on "Starting a

Center" and Bobbie Silk's (ed.) *The Writing Center Resource Manual*), we found that much of the recent literature on writing center administration seemed more focused on existing centers rather than on brand-new facilities.[1] Truthfully, though, even if more resources and literature had existed, as new directors of a brand new center, we had precious little time to scour through such material. What we yearned for was to hear stories and practical advice from other relatively new directors who had recently been in our shoes: firsthand accounts of "what I know now that I wish I'd known then" or surefire tips for "starting off on the right foot."

Therefore, in this piece, I offer four brief, yet crucial, administrative lessons I learned as a first-year director. My hope is that these lessons and reminders, while not exhaustive, will serve as instructive guides to other directors of brand new centers and to first-year directors generally. While some of these lessons at first glance may appear obvious—*of course* one needs to become familiar with one's budget—there is often more to these basic lessons than meets the eye. Further, as new directors get caught up in a whirlwind of expectations and duties (often including such mundane tasks such as painting the center, moving furniture, and figuring out the surprisingly complex workings of the electronic time card system), it can sometimes be easy to lose sight of or gloss over even the most crucial administrative tenets and principles.

LESSON #1: GET TO KNOW YOUR BUDGET AND THE BUDGET PROCESS INTIMATELY

In her essay "Managing Encounters with Central Administration," Jeanne Simpson argues that when directing a center, "budgets drive all decision making and all priorities" (202). She correctly notes that "anything from a new building to adding a new course to buying cookies for a reception affects budget" (202). While it's crucial as a director of a new center to work out a plan for spending and accounting practices and to earmark sections of the budget for different resources, there are other, often less obvious, budget-related issues that new directors must be aware of, lest they be caught off guard as I was in my first year.

For example, most universities have strict, specific deadlines during the semester or fiscal year for purchasing different sorts of items—technology, furniture, office supplies, etc. These deadlines are often not public knowledge, and new directors should make a point to research and compile a purchasing timeline. Initially unaware of such deadlines, my co-director and I often found ourselves scrambling—literally having to drop what we were doing—to quickly research our equipment and technology needs so that we could sneak in our purchasing requests at the last possible minute.

In addition to learning about budget deadlines, directors of new centers should not assume, as we did, that the original "approved" budget is the only source of funding available. While directors can certainly seek out grant opportunities to gain additional funding, they should also be aware that universities often have existing "special funds" set aside for support services or services aimed at aiding student retention—a primary goal of most writing centers. Yet, again, such funding sources are often not "advertised," and administrators may not immediately think to extend such funding opportunities to new writing centers. It wasn't until my colleague and I, through a casual conversation with our department secretary, learned that we were eligible to receive approximately $2,000 of supplemental "Access to Learning" monies for computer software and training supplies. (And, of course, by the time we found out, we had just a 24-hour deadline to make our purchase requests).

While it might seem like strange advice in an age where university budget crunches seem increasingly prevalent, directors of new centers should construct a specific "wish list" of items they need and want, should supplemental funding ever become "suddenly" available.[2] This list should be as varied as pos-

sible, as well (not ten computers, for example), as alternative funding sources such as our own "Access to Learning" dollars are often restricted to specific types of items. Finally, directors of new centers should keep a running tab of those "hidden" expenses (e.g. phone hook-up, maintenance fees, etc.) that may have been left out of the original budget so that the following year's budget planning can be more efficient and accurate.

LESSON #2: ESTABLISH PROFESSIONAL HIRING PRACTICES EVEN BEFORE YOU OPEN YOUR DOORS

Like many centers, we decided to offer assistance through peer tutoring, and once word of our plans reached members of our department, we were approached by several colleagues who volunteered the names of "star pupils" they felt would make excellent tutors. Frankly, given all the administrative tasks that still lay ahead, it was tempting to hire these students on the spot. It would have been one more thing to cross off our ever-growing and evolving "to do" list.

Looking back, I'm exceedingly glad we didn't make such hasty hiring decisions. Most writing center administrators will tell you that a center is only as strong as its tutors, and this is *especially* the case for brand new centers that must make a positive first impression among several varied constituencies on campus—faculty, department administrators, deans, and of course, student clients. A semester before we even opened our doors, in the interest of fairness, diversity, and thoroughness, my colleague and I put out a call for tutors on the university's student employment Web site; constructed a formal application; screened candidates based on their application and a writing sample; and conducted in-person interviews with the strongest applicants.

While this process was time consuming and came at the incredibly busy end-of-the-semester rush, it was well worth it for two reasons. First, formal hiring practices generally result in higher quality tutors. My colleague and I were surprised, for example, that many of the strong writers we interviewed (many of whom were recommended to us by colleagues), clearly lacked the interpersonal and "soft skills" necessary for tutoring. Other candidates, after meeting with us, were surprised (often pleasantly) to learn that this job entailed a level of commitment and professionalism not required in other campus jobs. In fact, establishing this professionalism among staff is the second reason formal hiring procedures are so valuable; it allows directors to set a tone for the center even before the center has opened its doors. Jeanne Simpson notes that as directors, "We tend to form close relationships with our staff and lean toward informality of procedure." She goes on, noting that "more and more, we need to be cautious about our informality. It is, alas, one reason we tend to be regarded with less respect than we would like" (qtd. in Dvorak and Rafoth 185). Even if new directors are not blessed with a formal tutor training course, it is still important, perhaps even *more* important, to let new tutors know the professional nature and expectations of their job; and this process can start with a formalized hiring procedure.

> " *[N]ew directors may be their own worst enemies in feeling as if they must continually justify their center's worth through taking on additional work or services.* "

As part of this procedure, it is a good idea to inform prospective tutors of upcoming training/orientation sessions and to make these sessions mandatory. And, just as soon as hiring decisions have been made, new staff members should be given copies of *written* policies and procedural guidelines for the center so that they have a clear sense of the parameters of their new job. Tutors, after all, are often the best campus ambassadors for writing centers, and their professionalism especially reflects the reputation and respectability of brand new centers.

LESSON #3: COLLECT STATISTICS AND SHARE YOUR PROGRESS—EVEN IF NO ONE IS ASKING YOU TO

Based on my own experience and through conversations with other first-year directors, I discovered that, often, one of the biggest surprises to new directors is that after fighting hard to establish a writing center, suddenly no one is checking up on them to gauge their progress or success. This "freedom" can feel a bit disconcerting, but at the same time, it can feel like a relief—especially since, as Kelly Lowe points out, writing center scholarship has traditionally presented "academic administration as somehow part of an evil empire that is 'out to get' writing centers and their directors" (72). Yet, as Lowe and others argue, this "us vs. them" mentality tends to perpetuate the long-standing marginalization of writing centers.

Edward White urges writing center directors to take control of assessment since the perceptions derived from assessment often "determine resources" and influence institutional funding and decision making (306). For, as Jeanne Simpson notes, "Writing center directors may have little contact with upper administrators, but this lack of direct action should not be mistaken for a lack of interest" (199). And, as new directors might find out, this "interest" can manifest itself quite suddenly and unexpectedly; certainly, there's nothing worse than being caught off guard by an impromptu administrative request for a detailed progress report.

So, how can new directors take control of assessment as White advocates? First off, whether or not some form of assessment is mandated, the process itself should not be approached as some kind of drudge work primarily required to "please the prince." Instead, assessment should be viewed as immensely beneficial to the internal operations and goals of a center, particularly to new centers that are just beginning to get a feel for the needs, attitudes, and preferences of their clients. Second, when starting out, new directors might begin by focusing on two basic forms of assessment: use counts (total number of clients, year in school, number of repeat visitors, etc.) and tutorial quality. In terms of measuring the latter, it's helpful to design an evaluation form that clients fill out at the conclusion of each tutorial. While my fellow co-director and I found several sample forms online from many writing centers, we made sure to tailor our form to fit the needs and mission of our own center, which is important.

Assessment should never be generic. For example, because the approval of our center was tied so closely to our university's efforts to increase freshman retention and students' self-advocacy skills, we included questions that reinforced this mission: asking students, for example, if they felt more confident as writers as a result of their tutorial and if they felt they could *independently* apply the skills and concepts learned in the tutorial to future writing projects.

Once these evaluations and usage counts are collected, the third way directors of new centers can take control of assessment is to proactively share these results with colleagues and administrators on campus, particularly those results which are tied to the university's goals and mission. When sharing assessment results with upper administration on our own campus, we also made sure to highlight ways in which we would use the feedback we received to further improve our work in the center. We even used some feedback (students' desire for online tutoring, weekend hours, etc.) to argue for additional funding/support to expand our services in the future.

Although directors of new centers might not always be subject to external assessment demands, conducting assessment can help directors improve the services they offer and sharing assessment results with administrative stakeholders can highlight the validity of the center and the importance and necessity of its services to students.

LESSON #4: LEARN TO BE NOT JUST AN ADVOCATE FOR YOUR CENTER, BUT A PROTECTOR OF YOUR CENTER, AS WELL.

Most directors, especially those of new centers, realize that they need to become staunch advocates for their centers' services and are prepared to spend a good deal of time crafting clear, consistent promotional materials—bookmarks, a Web site, brochures, class visit "spiels," etc. My colleague and I spent hours drafting, designing, and promoting the written goals and objectives of our center and spreading the word to faculty and students about what they should expect (and in some cases *not* expect) from the writing center. Yet, as we soon learned the hard way, advocating alone is not enough—directors must also protect new centers from a host of external wishes and demands, as well as from directors' own well-meaning, but often overzealous, ambition.

New centers can be seen by universities as a sort of "cure all" for a variety of problems, and it isn't unusual for directors to quickly become swamped with numerous requests. During our first semester, for example, when our newly trained tutors were just beginning to hit their stride and gain confidence in their abilities, we were urged by several faculty members to expand our "basic" services to include specialized ESL tutoring, tutoring assistance for the Pre-Professional Skills Test (PPST) for Education majors, online tutoring, etc. To say the least, we were overwhelmed and felt guilty turning most of these requests down, explaining that as a brand new center, we simply lacked the funding, resources, and training to launch these specialized initiatives in our first year.

Sometimes, against our better judgment, we agreed to requests which we later regretted. For example, concerned about not getting enough traffic our first semester, we agreed to allow a Communications professor to send all of his students to us for required APA assistance—even though we had a stated policy against *forcing* students to utilize our services. This experiment, while resulting in some traffic, was not successful, as students reluctantly trudged up to the center, were passive during tutorials, and ended up turning in papers that were still not up to their professor's documentation standard—something he let us know.

Reflecting on their own experiences as first-year administrators, Lauren Fitzgerald and Denise Stephenson explain that it's easy and tempting to take on too much in the first year since new directors are often "uncertain about the parameters of [their] jobs, " and "desperately want to fit into their institutions" and "be seen as contributors" (122). In some cases, new directors may be their own worst enemies in feeling as if they must continually justify their center's worth through taking on additional work or services. This tendency to not protect one's time or reluctance to start off with *just* basic face-to-face tutorials is exacerbated by the fact that many new directors are products of graduate institutions whose writing centers offer an ambitious mix of successful programs/assistance. While it's advantageous to keep abreast of new developments in leading Research-I writing centers, it's also helpful for new directors to network and visit centers of peer institutions which more resemble their own. My colleague and I, for example, eventually talked to directors of other regional University of Wisconsin campus writing centers and gained many useful tips and realistic advice/benchmarks for our own center.

To further combat the urge to take on too much too soon (and to assuage any accompanying guilt), new directors should, of course, listen to requests from campus colleagues and administrators for additional services; they should also draw upon student responses and requests on tutorial evaluation sheets. However, instead of taking on *all* of these services or taking on *any* of them right away, new directors would be wise to develop a three-year or five-year strategic plan for their center. This

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plan should not be based on some generic idea of what all centers should eventually do/provide, but should be based on the needs and opportunities available on one's campus. For example, as a laptop campus which offers several online classes to distance education students, it made sense for us to begin developing online tutoring services in our second year; however, given our small ESL population at Stout, specialized training/tutoring for second-language students was not as high a priority as it might be for other centers.

It took my colleague and me a while to realize that no one on our campus expected us to immediately start out with the resources, support, and range of services of more well-established centers where the many services they offer are added slowly. Instead, faculty, students, and administrators—through their various requests—were primarily expressing excitement over our new service and were sharing all the possible ways in which they felt our center could be beneficial to students. Looking back, we learned that a new center's reputation is generally built on the quality of its *existing* services, not the services which it may provide in the future. Therefore, it's often best to start off with the "basics" and plan strategically in light of your campus's specific needs and mission.

There will always be an element of "trial by fire" for directors who are faced with the daunting task of starting a new center, and I therefore urge other directors of relatively new centers—once they've had a chance to catch their breath and reflect on their experiences—to respond to and augment the lessons and advice I've offered here. For through increased conversation and dialogue, we can learn from each other's triumphs and missteps and can make this trial more manageable, productive, and ultimately successful. ✦

Endnotes

[1] In 2006 (vol. 26.1), *The Writing Center Journal* published an annotated bibliography of the journal's last five years of feature articles and reviews. Of the 47 articles published between 2000-2005, only one (Lerner), was clearly marketed to new administrators of new centers.

[2] This advice was recently underscored in a post on the Writing Center Mailing List from an excited, yet anxious director (Carroll), who discovered she had $1,000 to spend on her center within 24 hours. In the discussion that followed her post, one director (Holland) noted that without being prepared for such sudden windfalls, a director can feel less like a seasoned administrative professional and more like a winner of a one-minute shopping spree, frantically flying around the aisles trying to make quick decisions and grabbing everything in sight to fill the cart.

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WRITING CENTER AS SCAPEGOAT: EXCUSES, PRETEXTS, AND PASSING THE BUCK

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In April of last year, a professor e-mailed to say that one of her students had visited our writing center recently and received poor advice on American Psychological Association style. In my reply, I asked for the student's name, the date of her visit, and the specific nature of the bad advice so I could review the session with the tutor who conducted it. The professor gave me the student's name and said the problem involved how to cite multiple authors of a single text, but her student could not remember the precise date of the visit. A quick check through our database helped explain the student's fuzzy memory: Her most recent tutorial had occurred eight months earlier. I sent my findings to the professor and explained that the writing center offers advice but cannot perfect students' papers (or their APA style). I expected her to read between the lines and understand that students (often happy to claim the credit for the strengths of a paper but less happy to claim the flaws) occasionally use the writing center as a scapegoat. In this case, as I saw it, the student had made some mistakes in APA and was laying the blame at the writing center's door. The professor disagreed, saying, "It doesn't matter how long ago the tutorial occurred. What matters is the poor quality of your advice."

To say that writing centers sometimes serve as scapegoats is at once an understatement and a truth so obvious one hardly need express it, though I'm certainly not the first to do so. In a 2003 *Writing Center Journal* article, Julie Baurer Morrison and Jean-Paul Nadeau theorize that students scapegoat the writing center because of a "self-serving bias, a psychological phenomenon whereby people attribute their successes to their own abilities and their failures to sources outside their control" (33). Whatever the cause, although most clients understand the purpose and ethical limitations of the writing center, some students, faculty, and administrators see the place as a handy repository for blame and for duties they wish to shirk. These duties do not always involve writing. This year, for example, a department chair asked if my people could proctor all of his department's online exams since "our faculty members don't want to waste their time doing it." Even when we manage to decline such a request, as I did, or refuse to accept the blame for a student's poor writing, these incidents raise a number of issues about where to draw the lines of responsibility. Writing center personnel sometimes give poor advice and lead writers astray. In spite of our best efforts, we have on occasion let student writers leave our centers without teaching them a great deal (or we have helped too much, thus becoming liable for corrections and suggestions), so we no doubt share in the responsibility for how well, or poorly, our clients write.   But I believe those of us who work in writing centers too often accept more responsibility and blame than we should.   Among other measures, writing center practitioners can help delineate the lines of responsibility and limit their risk of becoming scapegoats by continually communicating the center's mission to clients, keeping accurate records, and using hold-harmless clauses.

Good communication is perhaps the best the place to begin a writing center's defense against scapegoating. A majority of my own experiences with scapegoating occurred soon after the creation of our writing center. At that time, students, professors, and administrators had little knowledge of the purpose or mission of the center or what sort of help we offered.   Through a newsletter, handouts, public speeches, and conversations with students and faculty members, we did our best to educate the university community about what we could and could not do for writers.   And we continue to do so. For example, in brochures and on the internet, we publish a "Statement of Ethical Standards,"

which among other tenets includes following: "A text should reflect the student's own work and efforts; thus, consultants do not write any portion of a student's paper. For the same reason, consultants do not proofread what a student has written."

In spite of these widely published standards, many student writers come to the center expecting us to perfect their papers so that they can receive the ever-elusive "A" they desire. We often find ourselves, therefore, at cross purposes with our clientele as we insist on trying to teach them lessons more enduring than a good grade on a specific paper, lessons we hope will ultimately make them better writers. Similarly, some professors expect their students to leave the center cured of what ails them, or at least with mistake-free papers, and we sometimes hear such comments as "one of my students used the writing center and still makes grammar errors." By contrast, some English professors have viewed a stray pencil mark on a student's paper as tantamount to plagiarism. As director, I explain to everyone who has a stake in our work that the writing center is essentially a teaching service, that sometimes teaching requires us to mark on a student's paper, and that even though we would like every student to leave the center as an excellent writer, we cannot guarantee such results. To some extent, our efforts at clear communication have worked. Even the most aggressive public relations campaign, though, cannot reach all of its intended audience, and with new students, professors, and administrators coming to the university each year, the need to clearly convey the nature of our duties never ends.

And so, despite our efforts to help our clientele improve as writers and to inform them of our center's practical and ethical limitations, some students continue to see us as a handy place to deposit blame, and they occasionally find a friendly ear among professors, parents, or upper administrators. In such cases, a second line of defense—keeping good records of our consultations—has helped us disprove false accusations, correct misconceptions about our services, or improve our services when complaints are true. Ten or twelve years ago, for example, I received a call from our university's composition director, who had received a call from a dean, who had received a call from the provost, who had received a call from the chancellor, who had received a call from a young woman's irate father, who claimed I had certified as an "A" a paper for which she received a "D." This accusation rang false to me in part because of our center's policy against estimating grades or being too lavish with praise. Fortunately, we archive the sign-in sheets students fill out for each tutorial. In the "note" section at the bottom of the sheet, I had jotted down what the student and I had talked about, so I was able to inform the entire calling tree that I had told the student her essay was "woefully underdeveloped" and needed extensive revisions.

Our records came in handy again a couple of years ago when a social work professor called to ask why we had refused to help one of her students with sentence-level problems. As I explained, "We're in the business of helping writers with any needs they have, including sentence-level problems, and I can't remember ever turning someone away, but I'll see what I can find out." I had our office manager pull this student's tutoring records and discovered she had come to the center three times over the past two years, but for freshman composition not social work assignments. Each time, on the consultation form, she had asked for help with "arrangement" or "development of ideas," not sentence-level issues. I did not want to call the student a liar, so I simply characterized the results of my investigation as puzzling and let the professor read between the lines. The professor apologized for the incident and said she and the student would have a long talk. I suggested she encourage the student to try us again, saying we would do what we could within ethical boundaries to help.

Online tutoring has in recent years become a significant portion of our center's work, and has generated an equally significant number of complaints, quandaries, and incidents one could characterize as scapegoating. Once again, though, good record keeping has helped us resolve many of these problems. One incident began when a writing instructor told the composition director that our consultants were

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

acting unethically by doing too much for students. She claimed students could send a rough draft to the OWL and our consultants would revise the papers, sending back polished final drafts ready to turn in. I worried constantly about the potential for ethical breaches on the OWL, so I told the composition director I would immediately investigate. When I phoned the instructor, she repeated the complaint to me. I told her we routinely backed up our online tutorials and asked for the names of her students who had received ready-to-turn-in drafts, so I could review the consultants' work and take corrective action. But the instructor stammered and eventually admitted that none of her students had made these claims.   A student had heard, secondhand, that we were acting unethically and passed this rumor along to the instructor, who had called the composition director.   I invited the instructor to visit the center to see how we operated and to read some of the online tutorials, so she could judge for herself whether they were ethical. When she declined the invitation, I said I expected to hear no more accusations from her—without hard evidence—that the center was guilty of unethical behavior.

Most recently, a former dean and respected professor complained to my boss, an associate provost, that the writing center had failed to detect plagiarism in a graduate student's paper.   He believed our consultant, who had never worked with the student before and who had helped her via the OWL, should have seen blatant signs of plagiarism in the student's use of sources. His e-mail, which my boss forwarded, implied that our failure to detect and report the plagiarism to him amounted to collusion in the student's academic crime. I went to our archives, brought up the tutorial, read the paper, read the consultant's comments, and saw little to indicate that the student had plagiarized. Although she could possibly have lifted some passages from a source, she had written the paper in the first person, and it was stylistically rough—clearly an early draft. Where the student had used quotations, she cited them with footnotes in what resembled Turabian style. Nothing about the paper screamed plagiarism—at least to me. So I spent the next hour composing a reply to my boss, explaining why we had difficulty in detecting plagiarism in the student's paper, why the writing center should not get into the plagiarism policing business, and what we do when we detect what we believe could be plagiarism. The e-mail follows:

> Dear [Boss]:
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> [The student in question] submitted a paper to the Center for Writing on September 25, and [our consultant] did comment on it.   This paper is clearly not lifted from any sort of paper mill because it's rough at both the sentence and strategic levels. [The consultant] addressed such issues as avoiding too much plot summary and developing paragraphs more thoroughly, but she did not address any plagiarism issues. I don't think I would have done so either. Although some passages appear to be more smoothly written than others, I don't see any obviously plagiarized passages (and the student did cite sources, using footnotes, to indicate words she borrowed from sources).
>
> I'm troubled about [the professor's] complaint on a number of fronts:
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> - Most of the time, when we have not read a student's work before (or met with him or her), we have no previous knowledge of his or her style or level of ability, so we may be unable tell if the student has written the work (and we have to operate on the presumption that he or she has done so).
> - When we do detect a passage that sounds like a quotation (based on a sudden change in style or level of ability), we generally say, "This sounds like a quotation. Are these your words or the words of a source?" Often, students tell us, "This came from a book, but I haven't done my citations yet." We tell them to be sure to put quotation marks around the quotation and cite it properly. We also provide handouts on how to summarize ethically and avoid plagiarism. (I'll include the handout in this e-mail).
>   - We don't use plagiarism detection software in part because of the cost, but also because of the time factor (doing so would slow down our work tremendously and require a

- lot more staff). Also, like most other writing centers in the country, we have never seen ourselves as plagiarism police.
- To get into the plagiarism-detection business would, I fear, have a chilling effect on student writers, since even the most scrupulously ethical of them would not want to risk coming in for help only to be accused of cheating.
- If we accuse a student of plagiarism without legal proof, and we're wrong, we open ourselves up to a defamation of character lawsuit.

Professors have a much clearer sense of what individual students are capable of, in terms of character and writing ability, so they are in a far better position to detect plagiarism than we are. On the other hand, had Dr. [Blank] alerted us that he suspected [his student] of plagiarism, we would have approached the paper from a different perspective (asking her to come in for a face-to-face tutorial, for instance, and being sure to discuss how to ethically cite sources). At the moment, I'm not sure what else to say about this matter. I'll include [the student's] paper, along with [the consultant's] comments, as an attachment, so you can see what you think.

The associate provost agreed with my take on the situation, but she added that I should not have felt compelled to write so lengthy a response to the professor's complaint. Perhaps she was right (after all, she's the boss), but I wanted to give her—and myself—a complete rationale for rejecting the "writing center as plagiarism police" idea, especially since several professors had, in recent months, asked if me if the center routinely ran students' papers through Turn-It-In.com. In view of the complaining professor's implication that we had colluded in plagiarism, I also wanted to establish where I believed our responsibilities, and his, began and ended. In this case, the ability to recover, read, and analyze the student's paper and the consultant's comments made an informed defense against this accusation possible.

We put our center's latest line of defense against scapegoating—a hold-harmless clause—into place shortly after the professor blamed us for the APA style mistakes in her student's paper. Clear communication of our center's mission and evidence from our records had failed to convince the professor that the student, who had not visited the center for many months, bore some responsibility for learning to cite sources correctly. So I wrote the clause, which we appended to our sign-in sheet, and we now have students read and sign the statement before each tutorial. This clause reads:

> I understand that the consultants at the Center for Writing offer advice to the best of their ability, with the sole intention of helping me become a better writer. I also acknowledge that, whether or not I accept and use this advice, I continue to bear full responsibility for the content and quality of my work.

_____   _____
    Name   Date

Would the clause hold up in a court of law—or even in front of a university arbitration board? I'm not sure. But I hope it will remind students of their responsibilities as writers and the need to regard our advice with a skeptical eye. I also hope that the act of agreeing to these conditions by signing their names will make student writers hesitate before unjustly blaming a consultant for a poor grade or their own less-than-stellar efforts. In fact, last week a student read the clause, laughed, and apparently having gotten the point asked, "So I can't blame you guys if I get a 'C-minus'? Damn!" At the least, then, the clause serves as another way of communicating with students about our intended mission. At most, it offers a bit of quasi-legal proof that students understand and acknowledge their responsibility for the quality of their work—and thus the clause may prove useful if a complaint goes into some form of adjudication.

Complaints about our policies or services are a normal part of our work, and I generally try to see them as opportunities to reassess our services and take corrective action. If the complaints are legitimate—if the center or its employees have failed ethically or practically to help clients develop as writers—we need to freely admit our mistakes, apologize, and try to do better. After all, we should not let fear or exaggerated defensiveness cause us to engage in scapegoating ourselves, attempting to wriggle out of our own responsibilities. We must also remember that the best defense against scapegoating is doing excellent work. Although the English instructor's accusation of misbehavior on our OWL proved groundless, we undertook several improvements—including better training and monitoring of online tutorials—to guard against the wholesale editing or proofreading of student papers. In other words, the instructor caused us to reassess the boundaries of our responsibility and the quality of our work—if only to prevent future problems. Spurious accusations or complaints, though, can also do a great deal of harm to a center's morale and reputation. Scapegoating makes consultants, who are presumably doing the best job they can, feel unappreciated, weary, angry, and fearful.

Although the time, energy, and emotion we expend coping with false accusations or attempts to shift student or faculty responsibilities onto the writing center could be better spent fulfilling our primary mission, our failure to defend ourselves could cost us a great deal in the long run. Writing centers live or die on their *ethos*, which false claims of incompetence or unethical behavior can destroy. Against such attacks, perhaps the best defense is to provide consistently solid and ethically sound tutoring. Even when we have done so, though, we may on occasion have to defend ourselves, our consultants, and our centers with our entire rhetorical arsenal, including clear communication of our mission, hard evidence from our archives, and hold-harmless clauses. ✦

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STRUCTURING CHAOS: IMPLICATIONS OF TUTOR WRITING PROCESSES ON TUTORING

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Last year in our series of tutor training classes, a discussion of writing as process took an unexpected and fruitful turn. Knowing that students often enter the Writing Center without a clear understanding of how they produce papers, we felt that if each tutor articulated his or her own process, the activity could lead to more effective Writing Center sessions. Once tutors delineated what their processes were, we started to wonder what exactly the implication of so many disparate styles would have for tutoring. The obvious answer—all people have different writing styles and needs—did not seem to get at the heart of this activity. Delving deeper, we realized that we could use the articulation of our own styles to help students discover and appreciate their processes of writing. Instead of assuming one process fit all, or taking for granted that one's own process was the norm, we used the discovery of the multitude of writing processes to enrich tutoring sessions.

Additionally, we challenged ourselves to be as creative with the idea of the writing process as we did with the idea of what good tutoring should entail. Just as a rigidly controlled or rote tutoring session proves disastrous to the ideals of non-directive writing help, so too would assuming that the tutor's way of writing matched the student's own. Encouraging students to articulate their own processes could further our mission of helping students become better writers.

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM CLASS

By turns "structured (an almost completely linear process of brainstorming, drafting, editing) or "chaotic" (composing an essay in its entirety the wee hours of the morning before it is due), the extremes of process amongst the successful academic writers in the tutor training class was both surprising and enlightening. We realized that most students who visit the Writing Center would be represented by the range of tutors' writing styles. The single similar practice among all the tutors was that upon receiving a writing task each writer took some time to run ideas through his or her mind regarding the assignment. The depth of those thoughts varied widely, but there were thoughts just the same.

In written statements tutors delineated the extremes in writing processes. One wrote: "When I receive a writing assignment, my brain starts churning with thoughts immediately. I always have a pen and paper close at hand, even in my car, so that when ideas begin popping into my brain I can easily write them down." Alternately, another shared: "When I first receive an assignment, I read through the criteria and make any notes that the teacher verbally emphasizes. My organization included trying to make sure I put the assignment sheet somewhere that I will be able to find it at a much later date. . . . I then put the assignment peacefully out of my mind."

For the most part, however, most of the tutors had a writing style that falls somewhere comfortably between these two extremes. Again, most of the tutors spent time jotting notes regarding their topic prior to actually creating their work. It was common for most to have random ideas and thoughts come to mind or cross their line of vision unexpectedly and without warning. The tutors found it helpful to have notes and ideas on paper when they sat down to begin working on a paper.

Several of the tutors were more comfortable with the final draft of their paper if they began early enough to let it sit for a day or so before submission. This short time period let them reread their paper with a fresh eye and mind. Sometimes simply stepping away for a short time brought a clearer vision to the work.

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

There will never be two writing styles that are exactly the same. This truth is a good thing. The more aware tutors are to the varied styles of writing, the better prepared they will be to help a student develop a precise and complete paper. The "last minute writer" and the "early bird writer" are equal; they simply have different ways of achieving a final product.

THE NON-DIRECTIVE APPROACH AND PROCESS

The non-directive approach to tutoring has consistently worked well in almost all tutoring situations at the Writing Center. Whether students want help understanding an assignment, have specific grammar questions, or simply need encouragement, the unassuming and question-driven non-directive method has best allowed the student to control the Writing Center session.

In our experience, the non-directive approach to tutoring frequently involves answering students' questions and concerns with another leading question. For example, if a student asks how to begin an essay, the following questions could help with not just the single writing task at hand, but rather to illuminate the entire writing process.

> What ideas have you been thinking about already?
> Have you tried brainstorming in the past?
> Do you like to cluster your ideas?
> Which parts of the ideas you already have do you think are most important to state first?
> Where is the place you normally start?

Through never explicitly telling the student what to do, this approach assumes students know their favored process better than the tutor. It also allows for the knowledge that one process is not necessarily better than another. Maybe students don't know the "rules" of how to start a paper; perhaps they don't feel they are familiar with the subject and are uncertain. This method allows students to control not only the direction of the specific writing task, but also encourages them to consider their options regarding their process. When next faced with a similar situation, this non-directive exploration of process can help students feel more empowered.

EMPOWERMENT AND PROCESS

Reflecting on each tutor's unique approach to the writing process led us also to the questions we broached at the end of our tutoring sessions.

> How did the student feel about the session?
> Did they feel like the paper was improved?
> Were there any concerns we didn't address?

Our goals were both to help their drafts as well as to take some of the stress out of the process. Ultimately, we wished to empower the students to find confidence in their own unique writing styles.

We know that comfortable writers are better writers. Because many undergraduate writers use the same techniques that they have been taught, very few have branched out to find their own processes. By keeping an open mind and discussing all realms of the writing assignment, in time students may discover their own approach to each project.

Investing the time to discover our own writing process was a lesson in empowerment for us as well. We tutors became more patient with each student we served. We understood that many simply couldn't do their writing early because they thrived on last-minute preparation. While working on last-minute papers with harried students was frustrating, as writers most of us had been in similar situations. This exercise helped us remember this fact and turned what sometimes could be adversarial sessions into empathetic encounters between fellow writers. ✦

Tutor's Column

BIG THINGS DO COME IN SMALL PACKAGES

◆ *Emily Plummer*
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It is called small talk, but it makes a big difference. When we're battling nerves and discomfort, nothing breaks down the unease better than a grin, joke, or compliment. A friendly smile, warm greeting, and earnest interest should emerge as natural and commonplace behaviors in the public sphere. The unfortunate reality is, instead, that many of us avoid, dislike, or even detest having to "perform" such forced pleasantries. While sociability should never be a bother, why banter when a cell phone or iPod is within easy reach? The walk to class or the train ride is passed by taking out the cell phone or turning up the music volume, thereby ensuring that conversations and congeniality will not be needed. Antennas and headphones have become permanent fixtures of the face, thus relegating eye contact, amicability, and small talk in general to a status of burden and distress. Although it is called small talk, it is actually a big source of pressure, struggle, and contradiction.

Well then, what happens in a neutral area such as the writing center, where these phones and iPods must be turned off, or at the very least, tucked into pockets or purses? Much like those train rides and campus walks, a tutoring session places two people within inches of each other.

If tutors were to follow the inconsiderate and unfortunate protocol regularly practiced outside of the center, they would basically ignore their tutees. But, since the foundation of a writing center rests within its interactive, discussion-based approach to writing, this overall lack of attention is not possible. So, the next best option seems to be a disregard for small talk. As a soon-to-be tutor, I was surprised and dismayed upon observing this effect first-hand during two "shadow tutoring" sessions. Both veteran tutors whom I watched in action cut out any introductory conversation. There was no "hello," no "how are you," and no quick chatter about the nice weather. Granted, tutoring sessions are rather short and close proximity to a stranger may not always be immediately comfortable. Nonetheless, a tutor must integrate small talk into all of their sessions, unless they are actually aiming for a tense and ineffective outcome.

In other words, a tutoring session cannot be approached in the same manner as that train ride. Within the writing center, the people sitting together have already been put into a unique type of relationship. The tutee has sought out that seat next to the tutor. Ignorance of this proximity is simply not possible, but an avoidance of small talk should not be practiced either. The vulnerability of face-to-face interaction cannot be countered with portable technology inside the center. Those iPods are now pencils and pens, and the cell phones are thesis-driven papers and personal essays. While it may be possible to disappear in a self-made world of moveable music or cell phone conversations, the writing center environment consists only of tutor, writer, and writing. And, contrary to what one might expect, paper cuts are not the only risk of working in or seeking help through the writing center. Sharing writing and opening up to comments and criticisms is often difficult and uncomfortable for a tutee. Viewing the writing and offering an analysis that is both constructive and encouraging is generally challenging for the tutor as well. Thus, making small talk operates as a sort of metaphorical band-aid for the anxiety this process of exposure and response creates.

When writing center tutors are learning or applying for this job, tight quarters, constant conversations, and fragile egos are made obvious as the most inescapable, and perhaps most rewarding, aspects of the vocation. Therefore, being stingy with small talk is inexcusable. Tutors accept their jobs with this understanding as well as with a certain air of professionalism. Just as a person would not expect a dentist to pick up his drill before even politely saying hello, a tutee does not expect and will not be impressed by a tutor who picks up the pen before even trying to spark a conversation. Small talk will set the tone for an upcoming session, establishing the tutor as a likeable and approachable person. And, much like the dentist who tells a joke before beginning drill work, even if the minutes that follow are less than pleasant, at least the attempt to connect on a more personal level was made. It is a small expenditure for a big outcome. A few words, a couple of minutes, and a laugh or two have the potential to set any tutor and, subsequently, any tutoring session apart.

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

Although the merits of politeness and approachability alone should be convincing enough to make tutors use small talk in their sessions, it may be necessary to note that some introductory chatter has other, more technical benefits for the tutor. So, in the case of tutors who may still try to argue that small talk is a waste of precious tutorial minutes, consider these idle conversations as a gauge of the student's comfort, attitude, and overall knowledge of the writing topic at hand. Moreover, in the case of ESL students, small talk can be utilized as a means of assessing language proficiency, adjusting to accent and usage differences, and perhaps even learning something new about another culture. A similar discussion of the advantages small talk provides for tutors in an ESL session was articulated by fellow tutor, Melissa Wagner:

> The best way to make ESL learners feel more comfortable is to talk to them. I find most foreign students to be interesting, and sometimes it is nice to get to know more about them. Many of them have unique stories about why they came to the United States and how they got here. Within minutes, both you and the learner will be more relaxed. Idle talk will also give you an idea of how well the learner can speak English, and it will give you time to adjust to his or her accent while he or she adjusts to yours. (Wagner 8)

As Wagner describes, establishing rapport proves indispensable when working with ESL tutees. But, whether English is a student's first or second language, the points that Wagner offers about the necessity of small talk are equally applicable. Friendly conversation puts both tutee and tutor at ease in a subtle and pleasant manner, which is important and useful in any tutorial.

Building on these notions, small talk is perhaps most crucial for its inherent capacity to create a heightened sense of comfort and trust between tutee and tutor. Forming just this sort of relationship is a central aim of all tutors, regardless of their tutee's ethnicity, in the hopes that the learner will return to the center for future sessions. Although ESL students may feel the greatest unease when entering a tutorial for the first time, nearly all students experience some feelings of uncertainty or discomfort, regardless of their primary language. And, this is exactly where small talk comes into play. Asking these students about their weekend plans, last night's game, or their home state–or perhaps home country–eases their concerns, thus marking the commencement of trust and connection. Productive and intriguing exchanges about writing on this personal, face-to-face level cannot exist without that very sense of relationship. In this way, it could be argued that the fate of an entire session hinges on the presence of casual and friendly conversation in its first few minutes. The smallest of time slots carries the biggest benefits.

In addition, for tutors who are still not convinced that manners, the reduction of anxiety and uncertainty, the ability to further adjust to ESL students, and the establishment of trust are enough to sneak in that small talk, it has yet another favorable outcome. Although this may sound selfish, asking tutees questions about themselves and their lives opens a tutor to the potential of a new and interesting outlook on life, which is perhaps even more true with ESL students. Thus, within a few inches of a tutor's face lies an untapped resource for learning and engaging in what will hopefully come to be a meaningful discussion of the paper at hand and, if luck prevails, more. But if such attempts at discovery do not prove fruitful, then at least the effort was made. At the very worst, a less-than-perfect or unproductive tutoring session can still be learned from as well. If small talk offers such tremendous potential for growth, whether in the tutee's openness and comfort, the relationship between the tutor and tutee, or even just the tutor alone, then its use is essential and unique within all tutoring sessions.

Small talk is, obviously, not so small in effect. If the benefits of pleasant conversation are so marked within the realm of the writing center, then there is certainly a need to reintroduce and ensure its use in a broader sense as well. To this end, the previous assertion that a tutor cannot approach a session in the same way as a train ride may need qualification. A tutoring session can be approached in the same manner as a train ride if each is undertaken with the aims of rapport, respect, relationship, and recruiting further knowledge. Small talk has the ability to establish all of these advantages, both within the writing center and within the outside world. As my Tutoring Writers professor, Mary Beth Simmons, articulated, perhaps this column truly is "a refresher course for all of us." Take out the earphones, shut off the cell phone, and make a real effort to engage with those who are around you. Be friendly, insightful, and open in all areas of your life, tutoring and otherwise. Remember, it is small talk, but it makes a big difference.✦

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CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

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>.

April 12, 2008: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Philadelphia, PA
Contact Lori Salem: lori.salem@temple.edu or Dan Gallagher: dagallag@temple.edu. Conference Web site: <http://faculty.mc3.edu/hhalbert/MAWCA/2008/CFP.html>.

April 12-13, 2008: NorthEast Writing Centers Association, in Burlington, VT
Contact: Michelle Cox: michelle.cox@bridgew.edu. Conference Web site: <http://www.newca-conference.com/>.

April 25-26, 2008: Pacific Northwest Writing Centers Association, in Everett, WA
Contact: Ann Harrington: e-mail: aharrington@everettcc.edu; phone: 425-388-9309. Conference Web site: <http://www.pnwca.org/?q=node/86>.

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: Charlene Hirschi: chirschi@english.usu.edu or Claire Hughes: clairehughes@weber.edu. Conference Web site: <http://departments.weber.edu/writingcenter/IWCA.htm>.

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