THE WRITING LAB
NEWSLETTER

– FROM THE EDITOR –

In this issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, you'll find responses to some of our often recurring questions. Julie Moore, Erin SanGregory, Sarah Mattney, and Julie Morris advocate developing handouts to help tutors meeting up with papers written for other disciplines. If you're planning a new website or re-working an existing one, Jackie Grutsch McKinney offers an overview of how our websites have developed over time. Bonnie Devet focuses on questions new directors hear from faculty and offers very helpful advice. Jessica Stemmler continues the conversation with a cogent reminder to tutors that new college students will need assistance moving from secondary school composition to college writing.

And if you happen to notice the date of this issue, in the line running below the title, you'll see that this is a *WLN* issue for both December and January. In part, this is a recognition that most of us are off campus and away from our office mailboxes for part of December and January. As we've heard from some of you, when you return to campus in January, both the December and January issues are waiting for you. Another reason for this combined issue is that *WLN* is attempting to stay within our very limited budget while prices for printing continue to spiral. We may be cutting back on the number of issues per year to keep within our current subscription price.

In the meantime, as most of us prepare for a long—and much anticipated—winter holiday break, I wish us all peace, happiness, quality relaxing time, and bright days ahead in 2010.

✦ *Muriel Harris, editor*

INSIDE

DESIGNING TUTOR GUIDES TO ENHANCE EFFECTIVENESS ACROSS DISCIPLINES AND WITH SPECIAL DEMOGRAPHICS

✦ *Julie L. Moore, Erin SanGregory, and Sarah Matney*
Cedarville University, Cedarville, OH and Julie Morris, The Ohio State University Columbus, OH

"I have to write a new-critical analysis of 'The Blessing' by James Wright," the student explained to her tutor, a business major.

"Ok. So explain to me what a new-critical analysis is."

"You mean you don't know? You haven't written one before?"

"No. But you can explain to me how the paper works, then I can help you."

"Well, I'm not sure how it works. That's why I'm here!"

Such awkward moments were not uncommon when I (Julie Moore) began directing the new writing center at Cedarville University (CU) back in 2002. Like many writing centers, mine has a staff composed of undergraduates who represent a variety of majors, ranging from English to engineering. Although the tutors possess effective writing and interpersonal communications skills, they often don't possess knowledge regarding the modes of writing in dis-

ciplines different from their majors. Thus, tutors who are psychology or finance majors wonder what a literary analysis is supposed to look like, and English majors on staff ask how public health papers in nursing, lab reports in engineering, or monographs in criminal justice are written. In short, my tutors have blind spots.

In order to minimize those blind spots—to broaden the tutors' vision—I planned to teach them about the writing they know so little about, specifically by working with them to create a series of tutoring guides for writing in different disciplines. However, the tutors and I realized our approach was both complex and controversial because it walked the line between specialist and generalist viewpoints. Ray Wallace argues that tutors should "understand what the discipline professor expects as an end-product from the student being tutored" (404). Such understanding can be gained from either general resources about discipline-specific writing offered on writing center websites and in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) books or from local resources like the professors at individual universities. We at CU, and subsequently, at The Ohio State University (OSU), opted to focus on local resources. We believed that the local connection was crucial because we had to practice what we preached: collaborating to discover meaning.

We met with individual professors and discussed the professors' expectations for assignments. After these meetings, we developed tutoring guides that would have a two-fold usefulness: serving to train tutors in our writing center courses about discipline-specific expectations and providing quasi "cheat sheets" for tutors to consult right before, or even during, tutoring sessions. Our goal was to make each guide brief and bulleted since it was meant as a reference tool, not as an exhaustive resource to discipline-specific writing. Presently, CU has developed guides to assist tutors with papers in literary analysis and theory, comparative politics, criminal justice, and technical writing, while OSU developed a guide for psychology papers.

Each guide highlights "the assignment in general," providing a brief overview of the assignment's purpose, audience, and main focus. Below this description appears a section that explains the "paper's structure and development." This section lists what content the paper should include and, often, how that content should be organized. For instance, the first guide I developed at CU—for literary analysis—reminds tutors that plot summaries are inappropriate and depth of interpretations is expected. Tutors who are non-English majors and who perhaps wrote book reviews or character sketches in high school English learn that the literary analysis is instead an argument that requires the use of textual evidence to support interpretations. Another good example is the guide I developed for criminal justice papers. It provides the basic format for the "S.W.O.T." model: Strengths of present condition, Weaknesses of present condition, Opportunities for growth in the system, and Threats to the present system. This was a model unfamiliar to all the tutors on staff, yet a model that all criminal justice students must use to write their monographs.

Every guide ends with special notes that provide further explanation about particular professors' expectations. For example, at the bottom of the literary analysis guide appear six questions the tutor can ask about the paper's depth and complexity as well as its textual support and thesis development. These questions reflect the concepts professors in CU's literary analysis courses stress to their students in lectures and class discussions. Through the questions, the writing center comes alongside of these professors and students to reinforce those concepts: the guides establish a vital connection to the local campus.

At OSU, tutor Julie Morris designed a guide for writers in psychology. After meeting with OSU psychology professors and the OSU psychology advising department, Julie organized their responses and realized a clear distinction between writing in lower-level courses and writing in upper-level courses. In introductory psychology courses, students most often respond to a question or a prompt, and instructors want their writing assignments to gauge students' understanding of psychological concepts. In upper-level

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or graduate psychology courses, instructors expect more specific, scientific forms of writing—such as literature reviews or formal research papers. These instructors emphasize the importance of their students' engaging with and contributing to the larger body of psychological research. Given the distinct goals and assignments of lower-level and upper-level courses, Julie split the guide into two parts, one outlining some general points about writing in psychology (e.g., use of APA style, clarity of writing) and the other providing tips for specific types of writing in psychology (e.g., literature reviews and formal research papers).

It is interesting to note that OSU's writing center is primarily staffed by graduate students (about 75%), who come from a wide variety of disciplines, such as English, comparative studies, and psychology; yet despite this difference in staffing between the writing centers at OSU and CU, the benefits of using tutoring guides have been the same: overall, the guides provide easy-to-glance-at references for tutors who are unfamiliar with a field. They provide tutors with specific, helpful questions to ask themselves or their clients during a tutorial. And perhaps most important, the guides are potentially useful to writing centers elsewhere as templates adaptable to their own campuses. Once we'd developed our guides, we began to share them at conferences. As we presented our work to other directors, we encountered an interesting debate. Specifically, some directors feared we were suggesting that generalist tutors could not be effective, thereby contradicting some long-accepted writing center theory. Susan Hubbuch offers a perspective shared by these writing center directors: "The ignorant tutor, by virtue of her ignorance, is just as likely—perhaps even more likely—than the expert to help the student recognize what must be stated in the text" (28). Such ignorance, as much writing center theory goes, enhances the process of co-learning and collaboration during the session because it maintains the equal relationship between tutor and writer (the tutor is *not* an expert and the writer is *not* passive) and because it offers the possibility of constructing meaning during the session. Furthermore, Anne Ellen Geller posits,

> [A]nother advantage of working outside one's discipline is helping students be more invested students in that discipline. . . . [I]t's a great opportunity to help the student writer take responsibility for knowledge, genre, content, etc., and for the tutor to learn something about relying on or working from the student's knowledge. (qtd. in Gillespie and Lerner 160)

Therefore, the generalist tutor ensures that writers be expert on their own discipline. Suffice it to say, this view also helps to enforce another writing center mantra: *We're writing tutors, not content tutors*.

We assured these directors that we were not suggesting tutors must become specialists in subject areas in order to be effective. However, we also pointed out that tutors often do need a "way in" to particular modes of writing to help writers across disciplines. For example, Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz, after studying how well non-English majors tutored English majors, concluded the following:

> Good tutoring strategies alone were not enough. All of the tutors were trained to address global before local concerns, to use questioning to draw out a student's ideas, to refrain from appropriating the student's paper. . . . But [they] seem unable to apply them when working with students on assignments that require knowledge of a discipline other than their own. ("Look Back" 269)

Though Kiedaisch and Dinitz admitted their study was limited, they still argued that generalist tutors can experience significant problems when they are "ignorant" of the modes of writing specific to a certain discipline. Like Kiedaisch and Dinitz, I found that when our non-English majors tutored students on literary analysis papers, sometimes they didn't encourage students to abandon plot summaries, and sometimes they were dumbstruck when faced with feminist or historical/cultural readings of texts. The reason for this phenomenon is simple, as Catherine Blair notes: "Each discipline has its own relationship to language" (qtd. in Waldo 417). Since such distinctions do indeed exist, Mark Waldo, when discussing the need for specialist tutors to help support WAC programs, argues that writing centers should

> *" [W]e were not suggesting tutors must become specialists in subject areas in order to be effective. However, . . . tutors often do need a 'way in' to particular modes of writing to help writers across disciplines. "*

TAKE NOTE

use tutors with bachelor's degrees in specific disciplines who will only tutor students from those disciplines. He contends that writing centers should "focus tutor training and philosophy on the values shared between disciplines" (423).

Though Waldo certainly has a point, the reality for most writing centers is that resources are scarce and such experts either cannot be financed or cannot be found—especially at small liberal arts colleges that lack graduate programs and graduate assistants. Moreover, we are not convinced that specialists in the disciplines are required as tutors. The principles behind the generalist tutor are sound ones: peer tutors offer invaluable assistance when they are not perceived as "experts." Truly, they effectively build confidence in writers when the writers are empowered to *own* their papers—and their disciplines—and tutors also, by necessity, ensure that those writers take responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, it seems that tutors are most effective when they act as generalists who also have a handle on the modes of writing required across the disciplines.

As we began using these discipline-specific guides two years ago, we also wondered about assisting students whose learning styles or culture and language are unfamiliar to tutors. For instance, Sarah Matney, a CU consultant, researched how to effectively tutor students with learning disabilities, specifically students with language and speech impairments, attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia. As a result, Sarah developed three guides that help tutors recognize certain characteristics of these learning disabilities and provide practical strategies for assisting students with such disabilities. For example, the ADHD tutor guide reminds tutors that if a student seems easily distracted and fidgety, that behavior could be indicative of this learning disability and not at all indicative of a reluctant writer. The guide then suggests tutors respond by encouraging constructive movement during the session, perhaps having the student pace while reading his paper aloud.

Another success story regards Erin SanGregory, another tutor on staff at CU, who researched how to effectively tutor Asian students who are non-native speakers (NNS) of English. She developed a guide to assist CU tutors working with these students. Erin's guide is particularly notable because it encourages tutors to focus on helping such writers bridge cultural gaps, especially how to help them meet assignments embedded with American cultural assumptions (e.g., "Write a paper on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech."). Her guide walks tutors through three stages of any tutoring session with CU's Asian NNS students: the pre-session, pre-textual, and textual phases. The guide reminds tutors that since our Asian students may "view the tutor as a directive authority" and may have a legitimate need to "maintain positive face," tutors should respect such students' "willingness to come to the writing center" and explain the type of "question-asking [dialogue that takes place in the writing center] as part of the learning process." As the guide moves to the pre-textual phase, it reviews for tutors how they need to establish rapport before accomplishing tasks (because jumping right into the task at hand could be perceived as rude or insensitive); to ask about the student's writing experience in the genre assigned; and to be prepared to provide—and receive—cultural or historical information to assist the student. Finally, the guide covers the textual phase, instructing tutors to be clear and specific with their praise and to assist the student with western rhetorical patterns. In addition, it reminds tutors that they may need to explain the western concept regarding the ownership of ideas that makes documentation necessary.

Erin's and Sarah's guides are particularly helpful in addressing a main concern of writing center pedagogy that Kiedaisch and Dinitz ("Changing Notions") discuss: "[A]lthough both tutor and writer bring differences to a session, creating a way for them to interact is the tutor's responsibility" (48). These guides aim to help tutors avoid a detrimental "sub-text" sometimes inherent in writing center training and practice, that tutors function to make learning disabled and NNS students "become like [the tutors]" (42). The guides offer the tutors specific techniques for preserving the identity of the writers while working to help them improve their writing.

That being said, it is important to note the limitations of these guides. Without the appropriate contextualization of the guides' theoretical bases, the guides would be over-simplistic. For instance, not all learning disabled, indeed not all dyslexic writers, experience identical manifestations of their disability. Likewise, not all Asian writers require identical tutoring approaches. Using the guides without prior training regarding the complexi-

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ties of disabilities and culture, tutors could be tempted to use a "one size fits all" approach with such students, an approach that for obvious reasons is ineffective and one we writing center administrators try to avoid teaching our tutors in the first place. Yet, as we work to avoid such an oversimplistic response, tutors, especially peer tutors, find it challenging to remember all the complex principles related to tutoring students from diverse demographics and disciplines. Indeed, as Kiedaisch and Dinitz observe, tutors "feel overwhelmed" in the face of so much diversity. In fact, the authors quote one of their tutors, who asks,

> "How . . . can we make any practical use of all that we have learned when working with a writer only once (or even a couple of times)? Are we supposed to approach every student, in every session, thinking about the complex interaction between our own and the writer's learning and composing styles, communication preferences, and literacy practices, and about how each of these have been shaped by culture, race, class, gender, and sexuality?" ("Changing Notions" 49).

Certainly, it *is* challenging, perhaps even impossible, not only to remember but also to apply correctly everything learned in a required training course. Even if directors train their tutors in the principles of "universal design" as Kiedaisch and Dinitz propose, they cannot escape the unique identities of individuals writing about disciplines with which tutors don't have first-hand experience. The purpose of the guides, therefore, is to help tutors recall significant principles and a variety of approaches learned in their training courses.

At both CU and OSU, tutors have testified to the helpfulness of these guides. Although neither school has formally evaluated the effectiveness of the guides, new tutors express an interest in and an appreciation for the guides as they learn the ropes. These guides calm beginning tutors' nerves and ease the overwhelming nature of tutoring across the disciplines. In addition, some veteran tutors swear by certain guides, like non-English majors at CU who use the literary analysis and literary theory guides in every session they conduct with literary analysis students. They say they do so because the guides help both tutor and student develop an agenda for the session and check to see if the paper fits the assignment.

To sum up, tutor guides provide writing tutors with enough information to feel confident in disciplines unfamiliar to them, yet they do not erase the expectation that the writer is the subject expert. In addition, the guides provide tutors with specific suggestions for working with writers with special needs or from cultures unfamiliar to the tutors. Directors and tutors can design their own guides by meeting with professors on their campuses and then drawing up suggestions for tutors to follow. Or they can base their guides on the ones we have available online at the CU Writing Center's website: <http://www.cedarville.edu/departments/writingcenter/studentresources.cfm>. What's more, developing the guides has the added benefit of advertising the center's services and establishing relationships with a variety of instructors across the disciplines. For us, such collaboration has been well worth the effort. ✦

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*𝒩*EWS

LEIGH RYAN RECEIVES 2009 NCPTW MAXWELL AWARD

Dr. Leigh Ryan, Director of the Writing Center at the University of Maryland, has won the 2009 Ron Maxwell Award for Distinguished Leadership in Promoting the Collaborative Learning Practices of Peer Tutors in Writing. The award plaque and a $200 check were presented on November 7 at the 26th annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW), hosted by Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, MA.

The award recognizes a professional within the NCPTW organization for dedication to and leadership in collaborative learning in writing centers, for aiding students in together taking on more responsibility for their learning, and, thus, for promoting the work of peer tutors. Its presentation also denotes extraordinary service to the evolution of the conference organization.

TAKE NOTE

GEEK IN THE CENTER

WRITING CENTER WEBSITES, THEN AND NOW

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I recently received an e-mail from a fellow writing center director who was working on creating the first writing center website for her institution. I didn't envy her situation. Though I knew she'd be able to find many great sources on writing center websites, I also had a hunch that most of those sources would be only moderately helpful as technology years seem to be on par with dog years; an article written in 1999, say, can feel not just ten years old, but more like seventy. That is not to say that these sources are somehow irrelevant—they are not. Many broach issues that transcend technological changes and even forecast these changes. Nonetheless, the exchange made me wonder about what could be said about writing centers' online presence today. What should be considerations as writing centers create and maintain online spaces? On that note, this column will address writing center online spaces: what they were, what they are, and what new issues deserve our attention.

For the purposes of this column, which is looking broadly at writing centers online, I'll consider both what are called websites and OWLs (online writing labs); sometimes in the literature the label "OWL" indicates that a site offers online tutoring, sometimes not. For my purposes, it wasn't necessary to sort the sites with online tutoring from others, and I've opted to use "website" to mean any writing center online presence, whether or not it is also a site of online tutoring.

WHAT THEY WERE AND WHAT THEY ARE

In "Computers in the Writing Center: A Cautionary History," Peter Carino outlines how writing centers have used computer technologies from the 1980s to the early 1990s. In line with his strategy of subdividing that era by periods and technologies, I'll suggest— from examining scholarship, web archives[1], and current websites—a way to look at how writing center online work has developed.

- **Mid-1990s: Early Adopters**
Early adopters started OWLs, many using e-mail, chat rooms, MOOs, or campus networks for asynchronous tutoring. The *Association of Computers in Writing Newsletter* and *Computers and Composition* both devoted issues to online tutoring in 1995. The *Writing Lab Newsletter* published at least eight articles on OWLs between 1992 and 1995.

- **Late 1990s to Early 2000s: Tipping Point**
Programs like *Dreamweaver* and *Frontpage* allowed users to compose websites without knowing HTML. With a little practice, users made sites on par with professional sites. During this time, three key texts on online writing center work, *Wiring the Writing Center*, *Taking Flight with OWLs,* and *Electronic Writing Centers*, were all published.

- **Mid to Late 2000s: Institutional Takeovers, Third Party Apps, and Social Networks**
By this time period, web programming evolved beyond HTML. Many colleges and universities used content management systems to regulate school websites, which are now a major marketing and PR tool, resulting in design restrictions on writing center websites. Some writing centers tap into third-party applications and social networks to conduct writing center business (e.g. scheduling, chatting, tutoring, blogging). Articles on online writing center work are less frequent.

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AN EXAMPLE: BEMIDJI STATE UNIVERSITY

Bemidji State University's website, which is discussed in no less than four writing center publications over the years (see Pegg; Bruech; Balkus, et al.; Ryan and Zimmerelli), is illustrative of how a writing center website changes over time. In 1998, Bemidji State's website had a creative, impressive design for the time (See Figure 1). It is described as having "fine balance between humor and seriousness" (Pegg 199), and "a friendly atmosphere" (Balkus, et al.). The site remained similar in design and content up to 2005 when Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch notes the use of a couch on the homepage is an attempt to make the virtual space "homey" (29).
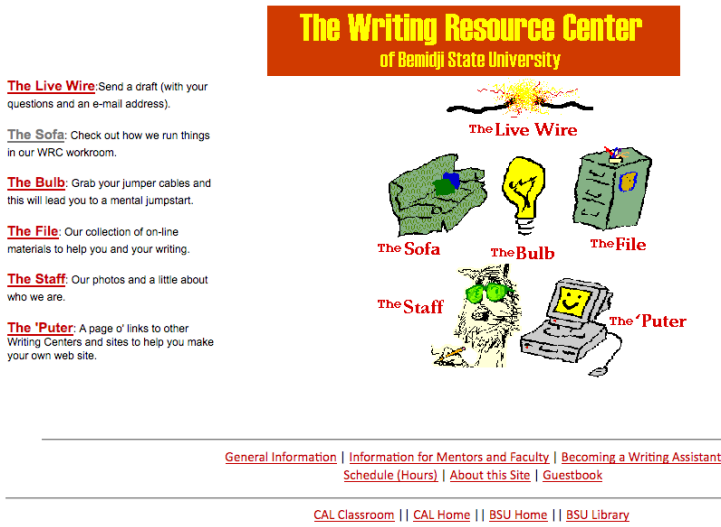

Figure 1: 2005 Bemidji State University Writing Resource Center site (from web.archive.org)
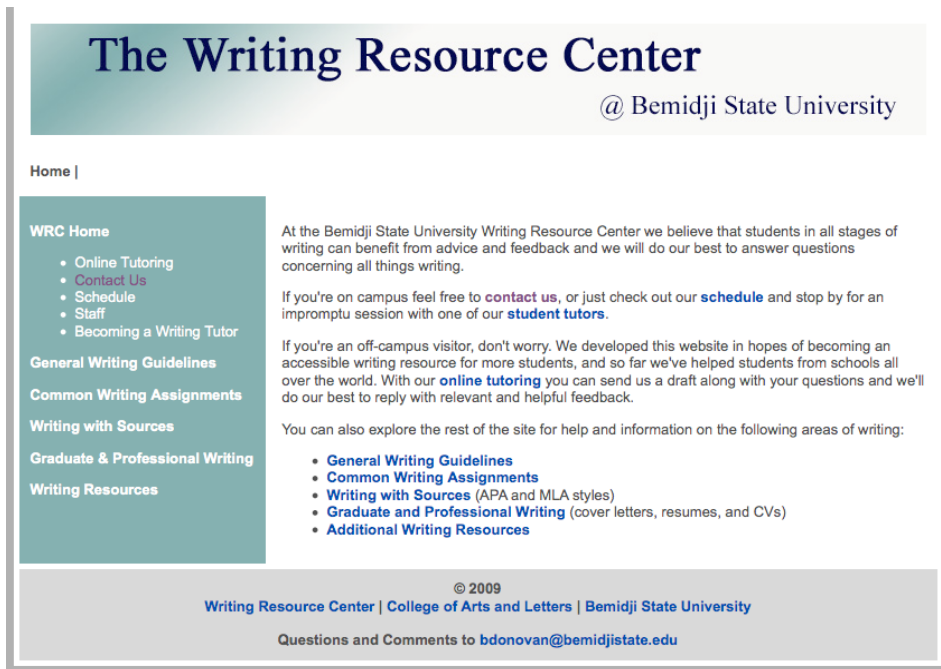

Figure 2: Current Version of Bemidji's Writing Resource Center website (http://www.bemidjistate.edu/

NEWS

WRITING FOR WLN

While the *Writing Lab Newsletter* welcomes submissions on any subject relevant to writing center theory, administration, and pedagogy, readers tell us there are particular topics that need more discussion, more research, more reflection. We hope the topic suggestions listed below will serve as an invitation to potential authors. Our readers are interested in learning more about the following:

• Training tutors to tutor online
• Reporting our work to administrators in ways that validate our work
• Assessing our work
• Presenting our work to review committees
• Working with WAC/WID programs
• Structuring writing centers in secondary schools
• Suggesting innovative ways to train tutors
• Working with students with special needs
• Encouraging tutors' professionalization
• Studying various ways to interact with writers online
• Focusing on services and structures of writing centers in countries other than the U.S.

If there are other topics or areas of focus that you want to read about, let us know. *WLN* is peer-reviewed, so we can't guarantee publication, but essays close to being ready for publication are likely to get helpful suggestions from reviewers. We all know that revision can strengthen essays. For guidelines for manuscripts, please see our website: <http://writinglabnewsletter.org>. We want *WLN* to continue providing you with articles that you want to read.

✦ *The WLN Editors*

TAKE NOTE

students/wrc/)

In 2006, though, Bemidji's website underwent a major redesign. Gone are the sofa and humorous icons in favor of a cleaner, more professional design. According to Brian Donovan, the director of the center, the site had "kudzued," overwhelming the student webmasters. This current design (see Figure 2), created by a peer tutor for a class project, was an attempt to reduce the work involved in keeping up the former site and a chance to employ design principles the tutor had learned.

While I was working on this column, I looked at over fifty writing center sites to gauge the current feel of writing center sites. Most of these looked more like Bemidji's redesign than like its former iteration; there is a wide level of professionalism, a sophistication of design, and perhaps even a formality. Many writing center sites employ their school or university's template. If writing centers are given institutional web space and access to university web designs or designers, this might indicate increasing institutional acceptance of writing centers.

CURRENT ISSUES

Institutional support comes with its own issues, of course. For one, if we are given institutional space (physical or virtual), we are beholden to those who grant us the space. In Mark Hall and Thia Wolf's article, "One Writing Center's First Steps onto the Web," the authors discuss how they got a grant from their Provost's office to pilot online tutoring. However, when the authors advocated synchronous over asynchronous tutoring, the Provost's office, which favored asynchronous tutoring, withdrew their financial support.

Other writing centers may not encounter anything as dramatic as this, but they still face ambivalence in being on the institutional space or site design. Directors may or may not have permission to edit their page content or design, which is the equivalent of being given a prominent room on campus only to be told you won't be given a key and won't be allowed to choose or arrange the furniture to your own purposes. Others may find themselves required to have an online presence, or they may want to develop their writing center sites but are not given financial support, incentive, or training to do so. These are the two main issues facing writing centers online today: we may have lost control somewhere between the second era and the third because outside forces now dictate content or design as Hall and Wolf's article illustrates, or we may be forced to compromise our online vision or not be able to fully articulate it because we are not given support to do so, financial or otherwise.

I don't want to overstate that position, though. There are writing center websites that are very consciously designed and well supported by their institutions, those that are adding dynamic content with podcasts, blogs, slidecasts, and chatting. The Texas A & M Writing Center website is a terrific example of what's possible today (<http://writingcenter.tamu.edu>). The site not only has great content and design, but, importantly, the center has dedicated substantial resources to developing and maintaining the site; the staff includes a web designer, podcasters, and videographer (Balester). Other writing centers are exploring "off the grid" applications such as Facebook, MySpace, Google Docs, and Twitter for taking writing center online work outside of the institutional dictates.[2]

So, after reflecting on the state of writing center websites, what advice would I offer? First, determine the (learning) goals of your site (see Bruech and Ahrenhoester & Brammer). Reflect on these goals periodically and revise them when needed. Second, don't start more than you can maintain. Ask yourself if the site plan can feasibly live beyond your current staff expertise or one time start-up funds. Third, insist upon on-going, appropriate funding, space, support, and control (that sounds familiar, doesn't it?). And, finally, be willing to abandon the endeavor if you are not sure why you are doing

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it, if you cannot maintain it, and if you are not empowered to make it what you want. Issues in our physical centers are also issues for our virtual spaces; we should design our online spaces with the same care, reflection, and theoretical understanding that we give to our physical ones. ✦

Notes

1. For websites that have maintained a constant URL and have a significant web presence, it is possible to view an archived version of their site by entering the URL into "the way back machine" found at <http://web.archive.org>. The archive might not preserve all formatting.

2. Schools and universities may increasingly monitor sites off-domain, however. Recently, my university sent me a list of guidelines for our center to follow on our social networking page.

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UNPACKING FACULTY'S QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS ABOUT THE WRITING CENTER: ADVICE FOR NEW WRITING CENTER DIRECTORS

✦ *Bonnie Devet*
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So, OK, you're excited. You are newly hired to direct your college's or university's writing center. Perhaps you have been an undergraduate tutor, and now you are buoyed by the prospect of finally becoming the leader of the center. You should relish your new role. Now that you are on the other side of the desk, you will—as a new director—have the support of a writing center community. But be aware. You also face myriad problems, lying in wait to pounce and to claw.

One such difficulty needs the best of your linguistic and diplomatic skills. Faculty from inside as well as outside the English Department will make comments or ask questions that, most of the time, may be innocent enough and born of the professors' sincere desire to help their classes. These remarks, nonetheless, need decoding and tactful, instructive answers, for they reveal long-standing misconceptions about centers and the teaching of writing. Many years ago, the motel chain Holiday Inn used the slogan, "The Best Surprise is No Surprise."   This motto, too, could be yours. So that you are not taken unawares and so that, with patience, you successfully educate faculty, let's examine some of the questions that professors might ask and some of the comments they might make, and, more important, let's examine what these questions and comments imply about the faculty's perception of your center and even the writing process itself.

THEY DON'T GET IT

Let's start with the most common of questions: "Now, what exactly do you do over there?" or "Wouldn't it be easier if clients just dropped off their papers so consultants could read them before working with students?" or "Your consultants don't write the students' papers, do they?" or "Isn't collaboration a form of plagiarism?" You might be rankled by such questions. With tons of writing center publicity distributed each term, and with this publicity clearly and explicitly stating consultants do not write or proofread papers but act as an audience and sounding board, collaborating with clients, you could find it dismal to hear faculty members ask these questions.

Don't be frustrated. Don't be surprised. Do be forgiving. Make a friend, not an enemy. For generosity's sake, assume the faculty probably lack time to read the center's flyers, brochures, and even those e-mails directed towards them. Of course, something else is going on here more shocking than lack of time for reading publicity. The questions reveal our public has not always easily grasped what is new and revolutionary—the writing center's collaborative consultation—no matter how patently simple and useful and beneficial. As a director, you need to describe again for these faculty the power of students' interacting with tutors as an immediate audience and as valued readers who respond to a paper's ideas, diction, and arrangement so that clients see their writing has an impact. Paint a vivid picture of how, from these flexible, conversational sessions, students learn about the writing process with caring readers by their sides (Harris). To change a faculty's frame of reference, you should be ready to describe the collaborative method, the heart and soul of any center's consultations. As scholarly backup, you can even refer the professor to Kenneth Bruffee's *A Short Course on Writing* as a primer on collaborative learning. And, of course, by asking the faculty member to watch a mock consultation between an experienced consultant and peer consultant role-playing a client, you also reveal the collaborative method used by the center in the composing process.

While I treat such questions as if they are being asked for the first time and while I answer with patiently detailed descriptions of the consultants' activities, I do not expect to win over every faculty member every time. Centers will always face inquiries about collaboration primarily because the writing process movement and the concept of writing as a social process have not been completely successful at winning over all faculty. Based on professors' own methods and on how they themselves were taught, all too many continue to believe writers live in garrets, composing in isolation (Ede 7-8). This platonic view that "inspiration comes from within, from a private sense of reading or truth" is an inaccurate, limited perception that removes writers from the influences of various social factors and denies the role of collaboration in writing (Lindemann 25). Such a comment indicates, sadly, that the process movement and its close friend the writing center still have a long war to fight.

THE CENTER OFFERS LIMITED SERVICE

You might be shocked by a comment from a faculty member such as "I've read my students' diagnostic essays, but I don't have anyone bad enough to need the center's help." Evidently, some faculty continue to believe centers work with only the so-called remedial students. Although it is true many centers originated during Open Admissions in the 1970's and were allies for basic writers, we directors know that over the years, centers have moved far beyond this mission. So, you'll explain to this professor that the center serves as an eager audience for all students since even the most capable writers also benefit from responses given by a real audience. But we must acknowledge that—sad but true—-many faculty persist in assuming centers help only at-risk student writers. These questions and comments, then, will continue to haunt directors, persistently, undesirably.

IT'S JUST AN ENGLISH LAB, RIGHT?

"Doesn't the center work only with first-year English classes?" or "You can't really help my history students, right?" or "I guess all your tutors are majoring in English. Can someone with a paper for political science come to your center?" The not-so-nuanced implication of these questions is that consultants have to be specialists in the clients' paper topics. To show this assumption is not valid, I explain to faculty that tutors help all students with any type of paper during students' entire college careers. The course or the type of paper does not matter. In fact, with tutors themselves having different majors, it is likely that a client writing a history term paper, for instance, may work with a consultant majoring in political science or a client with a biology lab report may receive help from a consultant majoring in psychology. The tutors do not need to know every discipline's rules, such as those for organizing a lab report or writing footnotes for history; they can locate this information in the center's resources. You can tell faculty that tutors play a more vital role: they are an ideal audience, that is, good writers trained to ask helpful questions, to demonstrate good writing habits, to listen to clients, to assist students by using reference books or by pulling out handouts from the center's files. Given these neutral, generalist roles, the writing center and its consultants serve, as Mark Waldo argues, as the seat for writing across the curriculum. So, with students learning to write throughout their college careers, the center helps any client in any discipline.

THE WRITING CENTER AS DRY CLEANER

"I'm always glad to hear my students have been to the writing center. I don't have to read their papers for grammar." This comment—more commonly heard than I care to remember—demonstrates how this faculty member persists in seeing the center as analogous to a one-hour dry cleaner: drop in, clean up, exit fast. With the grammar stains removed, the garment is presentable. The professor is also apparently assuming that writing mostly involves getting sentences "correct," a job he ascribes to the center. The professor does not realize that consultants view grammar as more complicated than looking for comma splices and pronoun reference. You might explain to the professor that grammar

ANNOUNCEMENTS

also means crafting sentences for power, finding the sinew and muscle of a sentence so it can work with the writer's thought, not against it. Shifting metaphors, you can also tell him that a malformed sentence, like a broken branch on a tree, mars the paper's symmetry and beauty and ideas. For consultants, writing is helping clients to create well-formed sentences, not merely plucking a leaf of a comma splice here and there.

THE WRITING CENTER AS MOLLY MAIDS

A question similar in scope is, "I received this paper full of grammatical errors, and my student told me, 'I went to the writing center.' What's happening over there anyway?" You might be even more worried by this question. The faculty member assumes the center is the next-to-the-last stop before the paper lands on his desk, implying we are Molly Maids, pulling up to a house, dragging out a vacuum cleaner, carrying dust cloths and brooms, tidying up before the professor sees the essay. This Molly Maid concept arises because students oftentimes have had teachers who did nothing else but correct every fused sentence or dangling modifier. You can tell faculty that consultants are trained to show clients specific representative errors and to explain to student writers how to repair those errors and spot them the next time they pop up in the essay. Then, students work independently, applying (or not) the advice that consultants have given them and becoming, as a result, responsible for their own papers.

STUDENTS ARE PASSIVE

Faculty sometimes reveal, as well, that they think their students are passive participants when working with consultants. Consider the following: "A student told me he went to the center, and he was through after only 15 minutes. What should my students bring to the writing center?" To this professor, clients probably sit like stones while consultants scan the writing. The best response (the way I actually went with this professor) is to mix into your answer a bit of theory and a smidge of practicality. I described for him how writing centers are places of dialogue about composition (Murphy 241), which means that the length of the session is based on what clients want to work on and how much time they have before their next classes. I then suggested that he tell his students to bring their assignment sheets and questions about their writing so clients can actively seek help from tutors.

CASH BACK

As credit card companies sometimes give cash back for purchases, faculty often, unfortunately, link visiting the center to students' receiving extra points: "I hope it's all right? I'm sending my students for a review of their papers; those students who go will get two extra points on their writing." Although I try to head off the cash-back approach, I am not always able to keep professors from announcing it to their classes.

So, as directors, we need to attack the problem. First, we can train the tutors who face clients seeking only an attendance record to encourage these students to pull out their drafts, to ask them many questions, and to give them handouts germane to the assignment. At least the visit is instructive about what the center can do should the clients want to take advantage of its services later. Then we can handle the faculty member. It is best to assume that even though a professor's heart is in the right place, she may not realize that this bribery makes the consultants' jobs harder. In fact, when I explain to faculty how some clients, seeking only the cash back credit, merely sign in, sit down, and wait for tutors to write up reports as evidence the students came to the center, professors are surprised to learn how their students exploit the system. Sometimes, in spite of my best efforts, faculty persist in linking the center with a bonus credit mill; if a faculty member insists, I ask her to explain to her classes that students must bring writing and be ready to seek help, not just show up only for a two-point bonus. The tutors can then try to work with the clients, hoping both students and faculty understand a little bit better what centers do best.

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

CONCLUSION

With so many questions and comments year after year, you may begin to wonder what you are doing wrong as misconceptions continue to surface. Because writing centers and labs have been around for over a half century—according to Neal Lerner, the first dissertation on the "writing laboratory" was written in 1953 —one would think faculty should know better. One would also assume that those inside and outside the English Department who have worked in centers as undergraduates or graduates should understand more accurately the educational concepts embodied by writing centers, especially since, in more recent years, centers have evolved beyond Andrea Lunsford's famous "storehouses" and "garrets" to become "Burkean parlors."

Alas, as the faculty's questions and comments reveal, the word has not gotten through. Joyce Seligman, former director of Bates College's Writing Workshop, provides an explanation: in graduate school, faculty, especially those content-area teachers not versed in the latest writing pedagogy, learn how to be scholars, not teachers, "narrowly focusing their goals in a desperate need to get through." So, the unstated but necessary task remains for directors: teaching the teachers about writing centers and especially about the writing process.

It is a hard task. But let new directors not be forlorn; you can, however, be forewarned. The faculty's comments and questions—as discouraging as some of them can be— are opportunities to discern more accurately how well professors perceive a writing center and the writing process. With such insight, you can fight the constant battle that all centers wage—spreading the simple concept of writing centers as places where students, through the help of tutors, are actively engaged in the composing process: discussing an idea, defending a concept, searching for words, deciding on content, revising for an audience, developing confidence and expertise. Just perhaps, if we directors keep answering the questions and keep explaining the famous "idea of a writing center" (North), faculty will at last experience on their pulses (as John Keats might say) the true role of tutors as readers, helping clients grow as writers. ✦

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Tutor's Column

THE LEAP INTO COLLEGE WRITING

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The transition into college life is never completely easy, and the transition into elevated academic expectations is even more difficult. This difficulty in transitioning becomes especially obvious in students' writing, which often reflects any gaps between what they were taught in high school and what is expected in college. As a tutor, I see numerous students come in to the Writing Center with all kinds of writing problems. After a short period of time in writing courses, they all seem to make one claim: they were not prepared for the expectations of college professors. It is then that tutors are handed the responsibility of doing all they can to help the student make that "leap" into the new expectations.

I have experienced this "gap" phenomenon, not only with my tutees, but with my own writing classes. I thought my very first college paper was great. We had taken time in class to revise it, and I had met all the requirements with ease. Really, the paper didn't sound bad at all. That was until I got my grade back. While I had gotten "A's" all through high school with little effort, here my "polished" paper had a bright red "C" on it. The expectations had been raised, and I was shocked that I was the one struggling to meet them.

My friends and classmates at the time expressed the same sense of shock, and it is expressed by the students I have tutored. We no longer can simply complete the requirements; we have to write our own opinions, thoughts, and reactions when we have never been asked to do so before. Some students are able to learn and meet the requirements with the professor's help alone, as I was. Others seem to reach a point where they get stuck and can not figure out why the methods they have used for so long no longer work to get that "A."

As I was looking into this high school to college gap, I realized that it is no secret within the academic world. My professors are well aware of it, and there is plenty of written material and research on the subject, even books such as *What is 'College Level' Writing?*, by Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg**.** Tutors and students alike are the product of a change in educational expectations from high school to college. There is no question that the students we are tutoring right now feel unprepared for what is expected of them. The question is, what do we do to help our tutees bridge that gap?

A lot of the problem is related to the students' mindset. Many continue to think of writing as purely an assignment, but it is so much more. In high school you wrote an essay, handed it in, and were rewarded for your efforts with an "A" or "B," as long as you answered the essay question in a legible format. The focus of these English courses is often grammar, organization, and reading comprehension, basics that need to be stressed at a high school level. My high school was one in which we just barely got into what a thesis was at the end of my senior year. The problem is that this "report" mindset carries over to college students who consider a paper completed when the question is answered within the required number of pages. What I discovered in college is that most professors care more about content than length. And I discovered that if my paper's content is good, it will usually fall within the page requirement.

Clues in a paper that there might be a problem bridging the gap are generally a weak thesis, poor organization or development, and grammar errors. I found in my own high school experience that these issues often are not the main focus of teachers, and as such do not receive the attention college professors can give them. Tutors are taught from the start to look for weaknesses in these areas, but with new college students we may also find that they do not understand the purpose of the assignment, that of learning how to write for the sake of written communication itself. All too often they rush through an assignment, do the minimum amount of work to answer the posed question, and consider the paper done. Then students have trouble when they find out that they are not "done," and tutors

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either lose them to frustration or manage to help them improve a necessary skill.

We need to realize that the difficulty in this transition is the fault of no one in particular. Students will rant, tutors will rave, and professors will grudgingly mark down grades. The truth of the matter is that high school teachers are doing their job and teaching the basics. College professors are holding students to a level of writing that will enable them to succeed in the outside world. Students are merely trying to bridge that gap between two institutions with different goals. We tutors especially need to have patience until the students land on the other side of the gap.

Letting students know that this is a common problem may help them have patience as well. Remembering our own shock on entering college may be one of our most valuable teaching tools for this "gap-bridging" student. Tricks that we were taught often will work for other students as well. Just because the "A" high school writer is getting a college "C" doesn't mean that person is incapable of writing an "A" paper; the skills just have to be taught. If tutors pull out tricks their own instructors have used, the student gets a wider array of tips than one professor would ever have time to mention. One student I tutored had taken AP courses in high school yet was still struggling with thesis development on a college level. I had her break down her paper into individual points as a visual representation of what her thesis seemed to be, as compared to what she wanted it to be. She then understood how college writing was far more than simply answering the question.

Another thing for the tutor to do is to try to explain to the frustrated, often angry, students that the "bar" has been raised. They are held to not only higher, but also different expectations that should be explained to them. This probably has been done by the professor, but we may still need to take on the task. Students then can begin to formulate the mindset that what is expected is more than just a formatted report, but a developed piece that makes a point and offers new thoughts. We need to change the student's focus from completing an assignment to practicing how to voice an opinion. It's like adding a sub-purpose to the assignment sheet. It gives students something to keep in the back of their minds as they write on their specified topics. After this is understood, theoretically, the process of examining papers for thesis, development, and grammatical issues will become smoother, with more purpose instead of frustration.

The next thing we, as tutors, need to help students understand is the importance of process and revision. Any foreign concept takes time to develop, and sometimes it takes longer than one might expect for a light-bulb to go on. If we remain patient with our tutees and help them revise, eventually we may get to the spot where they suddenly understand the expectations and how to accomplish them. Experience has taught me that revision and explanation of the reasons for that revision are the most helpful ways to learn something in writing. As tutors, that explanation is our job.

The gap between high school and college writing is no new topic. But tutors always need to be aware of it and try to deal with it. The educational community can try to address it, but we, as fellow students, are often the tutees' best hope for explanation. There is clearly a gap that needs to be crossed as efficiently as possible in order for the students to progress. With time and a lot of explanation, the students may no longer fear writing, but instead see it as a tool for their futures.◆

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CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

February 5-6, 2010: Southeastern Writing Centers Association Mini-Regional Conference: The Carolinas, in Wingate, NC
Contact: Laura Bokus, lbokus@cccti. edu. Conference website: <http:// backtothetutor-carolinas.blogspot. com/>.

February 6, 2010: Northern California Writing Centers Association, in Burlingame, CA
Contact: Jennifer Wells, jwells@ mercyhsb.com; conference NING: <http://norcalwca.ning.com/>.

March 5-6, 2010: Florida/Southeastern Writing Centers Association, in Fort Lauderdale, FL
Contact: swcaflorida@gmail.com; conference website: <http:// backtothetutor.blogspot.com/>.

April 8-10, 2010: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Lansing, MI
Contact: E-mail ecwca2010questions@ gmail.com; conference website: <http://writing.msu.edu/ecwca>.

April 9-10, 2010: Pacific Northwest Writing Centers Association, in Monmouth, OR
Contact: Katherine Schmidt: e-mail: writingcenter@wou.edu; phone: 503-838-8234. Conference Web site: <http://www.wou.edu/las/humanities/writingctr/PNWCA.php>.

April 9-10, 2010: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Newark, DE
Contact: Melissa Ianetta and Barbara Gaal Lutz (lutz@english.udel.edu). E-mail: MAWCAconference2010@ english.udel.edu.

April 10-11, 2010: New England Writing Centers Association, in Boston, MA
Contact: Kathryn Nielsen-Dube: 978-837-3551; Kathryn.nielsen@merrimack.edu; conference website: <www.newca-conference.com>.

May 25-28, 2010: European Writing Centers Association, in Paris, France
Contact: Ann Mott: amott@aup.fr. EWCA website: < http://ewca.sabanciuniv. edu/eng/.>.

November 3-6, 2010. International Writing Centers Association/National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, in Baltimore, MD
Contact: Barb Lutz and John Nordlof. E-mail: IWCAconference2010@english. udel.edu; conference website: <http:// www.mawcaonline.org/iwca>.